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The Language of the Body:  
An Analysis of Chaucer, Dunbar and Henryson.

PhD Thesis

Shane Maurice Collins

Department of English Studies

Durham University

2011

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# Material Abstract

## The Language of the Body:

### An Analysis of Chaucer, Dunbar and Henryson

Shane Maurice Collins

The role of the body in social life is a problem that occupies much of medieval thought. This thesis considers the poetic use of the language of the body to convey contemporary concerns and to explore the paradigms of the body that constituted medieval social normality. Each poet considered is deeply influenced the dominant modes of bodily discourse in medieval life; medicine, religion and natural philosophy. This thesis examines each of these modes of discourse and demonstrates their prevalence in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Henryson and William Dunbar. It is argued that each poet, while writing under the influence of his predecessors, displays characteristic attitudes to the body and to the social and political concerns that arise around it. It is shown that both of the Scottish poets owe a debt to Chaucer, but that they also develop ways of speaking of the body that are distinctive from him and from each other. This thesis shows three poets negotiating the problematic issue of the body in social life and illustrates their general conformity to social norms, but more importantly their occasional attempts to interrogate and uncover those ideas about the body that were broadly accepted by society.

For my parents.

## Acknowledgements

I have been very lucky to have had the help and support of more people than there is space to mention but I would like to thank the following people for their exceptional magnanimity. I would like to thank Durham University's Department of English Studies and Ustinov College for fostering my academic growth over the course of my studies. My colleagues at the Department of Access and Student Recruitment have been a bedrock of encouragement and patience, especially in the last year, and have shown me great friendship. I would like to thank Dr. Katherine Heavey and Dr. Niamh Collins for their helpful advice on the final drafts of my thesis. Dr. Neil Cartlidge gave me much valuable advice, especially in the early stages of my work, and helped me to shape the initial direction of my research. I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to my thesis supervisor, Professor Corinne Saunders, for giving me the opportunity to conduct my research under her guidance. I have benefited from countless hours of her advice, both for my research and my broader academic life. She is a model of kindness, generosity and wisdom, and I am very grateful to her. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their understanding and support. *Go raibh mile maith agaibh.*

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## Introduction

The focus of this thesis is the language of the body in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400), Robert Henryson (fl. c.1460-1500), and William Dunbar (c.1460-c.1520). It is proposed that in the works of each poet the language of the body is called upon for a variety of purposes. The three poets share some common interests and approaches but there are also substantial differences between them. The aim of this thesis is to outline a variety of ways in which late medieval poets thought and wrote of the human body. Their language frequently reflects apparent anxiety in society about the role of the body in human life. This thesis accepts the view that the body is socially constructed and it will be argued that the work of Chaucer and Henryson, in particular, demonstrates a poetic acknowledgement of the ways in which modes of discourse can affect people's relationships with, and attitudes toward, their own bodies and the bodies of others. Despite frequent anxiety about the body, however, it can also be a subject of genuine joy. Examples of both love poetry and religious poetry will be discussed to show the complicated and sometimes contradictory attitudes toward the body evident in medieval thought. In both types of poetry female bodies, in particular, are of central interest. These case studies have been chosen in order to show how each poet found innovative ways to speak of the body while drawing on influential traditions and powerful modes of discourse. In the case of each poet, the most striking poetry is frequently an exercise in stretching the limits of traditional modes.

## Chapter 1: Medieval Medical Theory and Practice

### *Medical Discourse and Analogy*

When medieval scholars speak of the body their attention is normally on its well-being. While this thesis will consider multiple discourses of the body, the major discourse of health and illness in the Middle Ages, and arguably the most influential, is that of medieval medicine and anatomical knowledge. Medical discourse in the Middle Ages was built on the foundations of classical medicine. Knowledge of the body's composition and functions relied largely on the pronouncements of classical authorities rather than on observation and experimentation. The authoritative sources for medical knowledge affected not just the development of medieval medicine but also the manner in which audiences tended to interpret the authoritative value of medical discourse itself. This chapter surveys medical knowledge in fourteenth-century England and Scotland. It focuses on the modes of discourse most likely to have influenced Geoffrey Chaucer, William Dunbar and Robert Henryson. Medieval medical understanding, and the Greek tradition in particular, is best understood when viewed in the context of medieval natural science. A consideration of the natural sciences is important because these poets were familiar with scholarly medical discourse as well as the broader discourse of natural philosophy. Nonetheless, it will also be important to consider the range of more informal discourse that informed the popular understanding of the

body. This will include folk traditions that predate the Norman invasion in the eleventh century, some of which are available to us in Anglo-Saxon works like the *Lacnunga*<sup>1</sup> and others in later Middle English lyrics.<sup>2</sup> Also strongly featuring is the political genre of the mirror for princes, from John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*<sup>3</sup> and Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*<sup>4</sup> to the *Regiment of Princes*<sup>5</sup> of Thomas Hoccleve, Chaucer's near contemporary.<sup>6</sup>

The language of each of the poets examined in this thesis is frequently influenced by medical discourse. An important aspect of each of their poetry is the relationship between authoritative discourse and other non-medical meanings in the poem itself. The language of the the *Tale of Melibee*, albeit in a prose text, provides a clear example of such tension between supposedly neutral authoritative knowledge and the non-medical intentions of the speaker.<sup>7</sup> In this case a Physician's Lord cannot decide what to do when his family has been attacked. The Physician offers him advice in the form of a medical metaphor:

...that right as maladies been cured by hir contraries, right so  
schul men warisshe werre by vengeaunce. (VII. 1016)<sup>8</sup>

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- 1 Edward Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The 'Lacnunga'*, 2 vols (Lewiston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).
  - 2 The short lyrics used in this chapter are taken from Maxwell S. Luria and Richard M. Hoffman, eds., *Middle English Lyrics*, Norton Critical Edition (London : Norton, 1974).
  - 3 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus : of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, trans. C.J. Nederman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).
  - 4 Giles of Rome, *Zwei Ostmitteldeutsche Bearbeitungen Lateinischer Prosadenkmäler*, Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1990).
  - 5 Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth, Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999).
  - 6 Derek Pearsall, "Hoccleve's Regiment of Princes: The Poetics of Royal Self-Representation," *Speculum* 69.2 (1994): 386-410.
  - 7 Shane Collins, "Politico Bodies: Bodies, Health and Illness as Metaphor in Late Medieval English Poetry," Diss. Trinity College Dublin, 2006.
  - 8 All references to Chaucer are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987). Further references will be cited by line number.

According to the Physician, then, the right course of action in the case of an attack is to seek vengeance. He justifies this by showing that by avenging an act of cruelty one mirrors the medical practice of treating an illness with some manifestation of its contrary.<sup>9</sup> For example, one might treat an illness of heat with the application of cold, although more commonly such oppositions were thought of in terms of humoral imbalance (of which more later). Chaucer explores the relationship between analogy and truth, and he demonstrates that apparent analogical truths are open to interpretation. Whereas the physician reads the analogy to justify a new act of war, the same metaphor is used by Dame Prudence to counsel a different path. In doing so she highlights the fact that those who interpret authority frequently do so to their own ends:

"Lo, lo," quod dame Prudence, "how lightly is every man enclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce! / Certes," quod she, "the wordes of the phisiciens ne sholde nat han been understonden in thys wise./ For certes, wikkednesse is nat contrarie to wikkednesse, ne vengeance to vengeance, ne wrong to wrong, but they been semblable./ And therefore o vengeance is nat warisshed by another vengeance, ne o wroong by another wroong,/ but everich of hem encreesceth and aggreggeth oother./ But certes, the wordes of the phisiciens sholde been understonden in wise:/ for good and wikkednesse been two contraries, and pees and werre, vengeance and suffraunce,

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9 This is a Galenic principle, and is one of the core ideas that he took from the Dogmatic tradition. The Dogmatic tradition focused on the connection between Macrocosm and Microcosm. This was profoundly influential on Galen and consequently on medieval medicine. See Oswei Temkin, *Galenism: Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973) 19.



discord and accord, and manye other thynges;/ but certes,  
 wikkednesse shal be warissshed by goodnesse, discord by accord,  
 werre by pees, and so forth of othere thynges.” (VII. 1280-1290)

She does not attempt to undermine the Physician’s source, the authoritative discourse of medicine, but rather she shows that his reading of such authority in this context is fallible. She also implies that the Physician has chosen to interpret the situation according to his own pre-existing inclinations. The disagreement evident in the *Tale of Melibee* shows not just that medical discourse was available to the medieval author, but also, and more importantly, it demonstrates that at least one medieval poet was aware that such discourse was not neutral in its influence on literary truth.

In this thesis it will be shown that medieval poets drew on a tradition of medical discourse that was dominated by Greek medicine but that that was also influenced by Roman, Germanic and later European influences (themselves a product of the same mix of traditions, viewed through the lens of Arab scholarship). The mixed language inheritance of medieval medicine itself also points to this chequered history. Each poet’s knowledge of the importance of maintaining health comes from the learned discourse of medicine but also from literature that offered *sentence* as well as *solas*.<sup>10</sup> Both in Chaucer’s writing and in, for example, the Mirror for Princes tradition medical language and other discourses of the body can serve both literal and metaphorical purposes. Thus the line between professional discourse and poetic embellishment is often

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<sup>10</sup> In this case I refer to those works that teach how to live (in the tradition of Mirrors for Princes), rather than those which teach how to love such as the *Roman de la Rose*. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, Trans. Frances Horgan (The World’s Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994).

unclear. From Chaucer's use of medical discourse in *The Tale of Melibee* it is certainly clear that medical language was not used simply to illustrate medical conditions. In the texts examined later in this thesis it will be shown that neither was it used solely to lend credibility to the sufferings of ill characters.

### *The Medical Traditions: An Overview*

Medical discourse and practice in late-medieval England were informed by a number of complementary influences. Medical theory, medical practice, and popular knowledge all drew on each of these influences to varying degrees. Medical practice and theory were composed of folk practices, herbal learning, religious influences, and indeed some empirical knowledge.<sup>11</sup> As such, what one might perceive to be the Greek medical tradition in medieval thought is, in fact, a mixed tradition, albeit one dominated by Greek influences. The transmission of medical knowledge to the medieval West, through Arab scholarship and translation, played a large part in the shape of medieval medicine. Despite the preponderance of Greek influences, *medicina* is itself a Roman term, "used for the art or practice of healing [and] metonymically for concrete things pertaining to this discipline, ... in medieval Latin this variety of terms remained in use".<sup>12</sup> This is analogous to the modern term *medicine*, with a similar two-fold meaning of both theory and practice. This means that when medieval poets referred to medicine they could, in fact, be referring to either its theoretical

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11 Stanley Rubin, *Medieval English Medicine* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1974) 69. This is a useful survey of medicine in the Anglo-Saxon period.

12 Mariken Teeuwen, *The Vocabulary of Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages*, *Etudes sur le Vocabulaire Intellectuel du Moy. Age* 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 402-403.

basis or its practice, and these were often somewhat different in nature.

Chaucer's understanding of this distinction is evident in his description of the *Doctour of Phisik*. His theoretical knowledge is attested (l. 411-421) and it is stated that he was "a verray, parfit praktisour" (l. 422). Nonetheless, Chaucer's description acknowledges the interdependence of learning and practical knowledge. He is grounded in *astronomye* and *magyk natureel* and he treats his patients with *drogges* and *letuaries*. His reading of the classical authorities is catalogued and his *mesurable* diet is likely a reference to the moderation advised both by the classical authorities and in the didactic mirrors for princes. Chaucer returns to the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical experience in other poetry, and this will be considered later in this thesis.

Both English and Scottish medicine share strong continental, and therefore Greek, influences. This influence grew in strength and took on a stronger Aristotelian bent following the explosion of scholarship in the Latin West known as the twelfth-century renaissance.<sup>13</sup> The history of medieval medicine is frequently characterised as the history of the transmission of Galenic, and therefore Aristotelian, thought to the medieval West. Galen was himself influenced by Aristotelian ideas (in particular his theory of the humors) but later scholars, in particular the Arab scholar Ibn Sina (Avicenna), made it their aim to more rigorously apply Aristotelian principles of causation to the Galenic system. This served further to rationalize and systematize medicine.

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13 Aristotle was largely known in a limited form, the *logica vetus* ("old logic"), through Boethius before the twelfth century. There is some critical disagreement as to what constitutes the *logica vetus* as opposed to the *logica nova*. For a brief discussion see Mark Sullivan, "What was True or False in the Old Logic," *The Journal of Philosophy* 67.20 (1970): 788-800.

Much of this medical tradition was new to England and derived from medical schools in southern Europe such as that at Salerno.<sup>14</sup> The logical basis of Galenic medicine, a consequence of its Aristotelian bent, might be suggested as one of the reasons it lends itself so well to analogy, as in the *Tale of Melibee*. It will be evident in the poetry examined in this thesis that the logic of medicine is one of the fundamental characteristics emphasised by the non-expert poets who borrowed some of its terms and structures of thought. Along with the Galenic system, some Roman medicine survived right through the early medieval period, and this tradition shares many features with Greek medicine, although it seemed to be more focused on practical application than theoretical understanding. While medieval medicine might be characterized by its theoretical basis, it was also influenced by the practical knowledge of folk and Roman medicine. Furthermore, the Anglo-Saxon inheritance includes much knowledge that dates from the Roman period in Britain. Medical practitioners probably varied from those highly reliant on their theoretical knowledge to those who were more pragmatic in approach.

Classical medicine went into decline along with the rest of classical learning during the early Middle Ages. The evidence for early medieval medicine is mainly found in the compilations of Marcellus of Bordeaux (c. AD 400),<sup>15</sup> Isidore of Seville (AD 570-636),<sup>16</sup> Bede (AD 674 - 735),<sup>17</sup> and the Abbot

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14 For a brief account of medical legends associated with Salerno see C. S., "Salerno: Its Medical School and its Medical Legends," *British Medical Journal* 2.4316 (1943): 402. For a more complete history see Morris Harold Saffron, "Maurus of Salerno: Twelfth-Century 'Optimus Physicus'. With His Commentary on the Prognostics of Hippocrates," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 62.1 (1972): 1-104.

15 Marcellus Empiricus, *De Medicamentis*, Library of Latin Texts – Series B (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 5 May 2011, <<http://clt.brepols.net.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/lltb/pages/Toc.aspx?ctx=68257>>.

16 Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006).

Hrabanus Maurus of Fulda (AD 780 – 856).<sup>18</sup> In the period between the ninth century and the twelfth century, this learning was largely replaced in England by Anglo-Saxon medical practices.<sup>19</sup> These combined old practices that are presumed to derive from older Germanic practices with the surviving elements of Roman medicine.<sup>20</sup> Anglo-Saxon medicine has come down to us through a number of Old English manuscripts, in which the emphasis tends to lie on the curative functions of plants and animal products, and *leeches* or cures for specific illnesses. Anglo-Saxon medicine can be characterized as a functional corpus of cures rather than a highly theoretical system like the Greek tradition. Nonetheless, theoretical learning was also evident even in the *Leechbook*<sup>21</sup> and also in some other Anglo-Saxon texts.<sup>22</sup> Despite the strong influence of theoretical medicine on the poets examined in this thesis, many assume that the practical measures taken in the Anglo-Saxon period lived on in popular tradition and also, very likely, in aspects of popular practice. Early medicine is thought to have been supported in practice by pagan ritual and in the early Christian era religious elements were included in place of, or combined with, pagan ritual.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand the Greek tradition is highly systematic and is rational in its processes. This is less true of Anglo-Saxon medical practice. Chaucer's emphasis on his Physician's lack of study of the Bible (I. 438) is

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17 The Venerable Bede, *Bede: On the Nature of Things and on Times*, trans. Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis, Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2010).

18 Hrabanus Maurus, *Hrabanus Maurus: De Universo: the Peculiar Properties of Words and their Mystical Significance*, trans. Priscilla Throop, 2 vols. (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2009).

19 Erwin H. Ackerknecht, *A Short History of Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 79-80.

20 Rubin 1.

21 Bald, *Bald's Leechbook (British Museum Royal Manuscript 12 D.XVII)*, ed. C.E. Wright, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 5 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955).

22 Irma Taavitsainen and Paivi Pahta, eds., *Medical and Scientific Writing in Late Medieval English* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 1.

23 Ackerknecht 80.

perhaps an indication both that Chaucer associated his Physician with the rational tradition of Greek medicine and, more importantly, that the poet was aware that such a disparity existed. Nevertheless, elsewhere in Chaucer's poetry the language of practical cures appears. He may, for example, have been influenced by a popular tradition of using leek against the ill effects of excessive consumption of alcohol in his description of the Summoner (I. 634). A fifteenth-century lyric advises the reader to use leek to avoid the negative consequences of drinking:

Juce of lekes with gotes galle  
 For evil heringe help it shalle.  
 Too partes of the juce, the third of galle,  
 Melled small, and warme withalle.  
 In noise or eir where it be do,  
 For grete hedewark well it slo;  
 Broken bones will it knit,  
 And angry sores wille it flit.  
 Lekes and salt same done,  
 Helpes a woman to clooe son.  
 It is gud for dronken men  
 A raw leke to ete, and comforteth the brain. (Huntington Lib.,  
 California, HU 1051)<sup>24</sup>

According to this lyric, leek can be eaten to remedy the head-aches caused by drinking too much alcohol, as well as other ailments. This is indeed the use to

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24 Luria and Hoffman no. 114.

which Chaucer's Summoner puts the leek. There is no particular evidence of this in Anglo-Saxon remedies, but it is an example of the kinds of practical medicine on which many people appear to have relied in the Middle Ages.<sup>25</sup>

Few medical manuscripts survive from the Anglo-Saxon period, although it is thought that those manuscripts that have survived were reasonably popular. Medical knowledge appears to have been maintained in a monastic context during this period throughout Western Europe and this is certainly true of England. The following manuscripts shape our understanding of Anglo-Saxon medicine: *The Herbarium of Apuleius Platonicus* / *The Anglo-Saxon Herbal* (MSS Cotton Vitellius CIII; Bodley Hatton 76, Oxford),<sup>26</sup> *Bald's Leechbook* (MS Royal 12D XVII),<sup>27</sup> the *Lacnunga* or *Recipes* (MS Harley 585),<sup>28</sup> and *Peri-Didaxeon* or *Schools of Medicine* (MS Harley 6258).<sup>29</sup> Of these, *The Anglo-Saxon Herbal* is the largest surviving and probably the best-known Anglo-Saxon medical manuscript.<sup>30</sup> Each chapter focuses on the qualities and uses of a particular plant or herb. It is lavishly illustrated, although these illustrations are not always useful for the identification of the plant concerned. Herbals remain important in the late Middle Ages and there are references to herbal treatments for illness in the poetry examined in this thesis. While the *Anglo-Saxon Herbal* is structured by curative ingredients, the *Lacnunga*, on the other hand, is structured by ailment. In this manuscript visible causes of illness

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25 Leek is used in some Anglo-Saxon charms, but not for this purpose. See, for example Felix Grendon, "The Anglo-Saxon Charms," *The Journal of American Folklore* 22.84 (1909): 105-237.

26 Oswald Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England, Being a Collection of Documents For the Most Part Never Before Printed, Illustrating the History of Science in this Country Before the Norman Conquest*, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* 35, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1864-66).

27 Taavitsainen and Pahta, 2004.

28 Pettit.

29 Cockayne.

30 Rubin 45.

are distinguished from invisible causes. There are a number of invisible causes in Anglo-Saxon texts, including elves, superstition regarding the number nine, the concept of the worm, and the flying venoms. Charms are prescribed against these dangers and they are composed of a mixture of pagan and Christian modes of discourse. In the *Lacnunga*, then, the reader is presented with a series of charms that are useful under different circumstances. The following example is representative:

Against flying venom, slash four strokes in the four quarters with an oaken brand; make the brand bloody, throw it away; sing this on it three times: [making the sign of the cross as drawn in the manuscript]

matheus me ducath, marcus me conseruaeth, lucas me liberat, iohannes me adiuuat semper. amen. Contriue deus omnem malum et nequitiam per uirtutem patris et filii et spiritus sancti sanctifica me emanuhel iesus christus libera me ab omnibus insidiis inimici; benedictio domini super caput meum; potens deus in omni tempore. amen. (*Lacnunga* 74)<sup>31</sup>

Karen Jolly notes that remedies for flying venom, such as that above, occur in all the medical texts and she argues that, rather than being a degenerate form of Christianity, the intention is “to drive out evil spirits using Christian prayers”.<sup>32</sup>

The shift from Anglo-Saxon medicine to late medieval rationalistic Greek

31 Translated in J. H. G. Grattan and Charles Singer. *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*, Publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum (London: Oxford University Press, 1952): “Matthew guide me, Mark protect me, Luke free me, John aid me, always, amen. Destroy, O God, all evil and wickedness; through the power of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit sanctify me; Emmanuel, Jesus Christ, free me from all attacks of the enemy; the benediction of the Lord (be) over my head; mighty God in every season. Amen].

32 Karen Jolly. *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 129.



medicine might be considered a Kuhnian paradigm shift.<sup>33</sup> While medical theory, practice and texts in England from the ninth century right through to the sixteenth century tend to contain some mixture of Greek medicine, Anglo-Saxon medicine, and religious and folk practices, the balance of emphasis in medical texts and in medical practice shifts dramatically towards Greek humoral theory, in the Galenic/ Hippocratic tradition, from the twelfth century onwards. This is symptomatic of the dramatic change towards a rationalistic approach to problems, alongside lingering elements of the old tradition. In the poetry examined in this thesis, old and new coexist in the linguistic palette of each poet. It will also be clear, particularly in Chaucer's works, that the poets associate different approaches to the medical treatment and understanding of the body with different social types. There are significant moments when characters appear to reject scholarly learning, for example in Alys' struggle with her husband in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

### *The Rational Tradition in Focus: Galen*

The most important early medieval inheritor of the Greek medical tradition was Galen of Pergamum (ca. 129-217 AD) and it was his compilation, interpretation and development of Greek medicine that shaped the later medieval understanding of Greek practitioners and medical theory. Galen was highly prolific, writing more than 500 medical treatises and commentaries. He was heavily indebted to Hippocrates (ca. 460-370 BC) and, indeed, his gloss of

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33 Thomas Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1962) 104.

Hippocrates was one of the works that became available to medieval scholars.<sup>34</sup> Like much of the rest of medieval natural philosophy, medieval Galenism was itself heavily indebted to both Plato and Aristotle. This is to be expected, as Greek medicine was in large part concerned with man's relationship with his environment, and that environment could only be understood in terms of contemporary natural philosophy. Galen also brought together aspects of many contemporary medical theories to create a system of medicine based on Aristotle's elemental theory and humoral human anatomy. Galen's medicine, for example, brought together the idea that the body is composed of humors (explained below) with the notion that there is a role for the *pneuma* (the Stoic concept of the breath of life) in the functioning of the human body. Greek ideas about the value of medicine and its place in society, as well as medical theory itself, were passed on to medieval European scholars. One might note, for example, the opening of *The Parliament of Fowls*: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne..." (PF, 1). This passage paraphrases the sentiments of Hippocrates' *Aphorisms*, in which medicine is envisaged as an art as well as a science.<sup>35</sup> Chaucer transmutes this to speak of love, but his knowledge of the passage is not in doubt. Pearl Kibre notes that "Galen himself had aided in the perpetuation of the concept of medicine as an art and the need for the physician to be both a philosopher and a technician".<sup>36</sup> Galen's own interest in the relationship between medicine and art is mirrored in the poetry examined in

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34 Rene Taton, ed, *A General History of the Sciences*, trans. A.J. Pomeran (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963).

35 Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, trans. Francis Adams, *The Internet Classics Archive*, ed. Daniel C. Stevenson, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 20 May 2010, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/aphorisms.html>>.

36 Pearl Kibre, *Studies in Medieval Science: Alchemy, Astrology, Mathematics and Medicine*, History Series 19 (London: Hambledon Press, 1984) 215.

this thesis, although its authors' interest tended to be in the role of authority in human life rather than in the efforts required to become a good doctor. It is clear that Greek thought influenced not only the late medieval understanding of the body itself, but also medieval attitudes to medicine as a craft designed to maintain the body's health. It is well known that medical students in fourteenth-century universities were expected to have prior training in the Arts,<sup>37</sup> but the relationship between the two goes deeper, to the parallel relationships between theory and practice, and between natural philosophy and social life. It is no surprise that Chaucer chose to draw an indirect analogy between the practice of medicine, the practice of art, and the practice of love (often characterised as a form of healing on the part of the lady) in the romance tradition. It is also unsurprising that in *The Tale of Melibee* the physician thinks it appropriate to draw an analogy between medical decisions and political decisions.

Despite the importance of Galen, the late Middle Ages does not owe a debt to him alone. Arab and Jewish scholars made a considerable contribution to Galenic medicine in the centuries before the flourishing of Galenism in the Latin West and the version of Galen's writings they transmitted were heavily modified. Furthermore, Galen's medical system was by no means complete and left plenty of room for further scholarship: "the exegetic key to Galen himself is to be found in the works of someone writing in any of the cultures where Galenism was developed and practiced at any moment in the lengthy period

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37 Huling E. Ussery, *Chaucer's Physician: Medicine and Literature in Fourteenth-century England*, Tulane Studies in English 19 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1971) 9.

during which it continued to be valid".<sup>38</sup> Arab scholars in particular had a strong influence on medieval Galenism. Most Greek scientific texts had been available in Arabic by the tenth century. Galen was chosen from a variety of Greek medical theorists and, had this choice not been made, it seems unlikely that Galen would have become synonymous with Greek medicine for the Latin West. While Galen had indeed made use of Aristotle's theories, the Arab world was responsible for much of the Aristotelianization of Galen's medicine. This process would be continued in universities in the Latin West in the thirteenth century. The process of translation from Arabic and Greek sources into Latin began in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Major early texts to be translated were the *Pantegni* of al-Mugasi (Haly Abbas, d.994)<sup>39</sup> and the *Isagoge* of Hunain ibn Ishaq (Johannitius, d.873).<sup>40</sup> These were both translated by Constantine of Monte Cassino in the late 1070's.<sup>41</sup> From the late twelfth century Avicenna's *Canon* joined these texts as an important source of medical authority.<sup>42</sup> Garcia-Ballester notes that while these translations made a strong contribution to Galenic medicine in the Latin West, they also spurred on further translation and scholarship:

While the intellectual framework of both texts is Aristotelian (as regards the concepts connected with natural philosophy that are employed and also the techniques of reasoning and expounding),

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38 Luis Garcia-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism: Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, ed. Jon Arrizabalaga et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) 4.

39 Charles Burnett and Danielle Jacquart, *Constantine the African and 'Alī ibn al- 'Abbās al-Maḡūsī: the Pantegni and Related Texts*, Studies in Ancient Medicine 10 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

40 Johannitius' *Isagoge* forms part of the *Articella*, a collection of medical treatises collected between the 13th and 16th centuries. See *Articella*, Kellett 361, Durham University, Durham, Eng.

41 Garcia Ballester 134.

42 The main medieval translators of Arabic in Latin of whom we are aware are Adelard of Bath, Robert of Chester, Alfred of Sarashel, Gerard of Cremona, Plato of Tivoli, Burgundio of Pisa, James of Venice, Eugenio of Palermo, Michael Scot, Hermann of Carinthia, and William of Moerbeke. Garcia Ballester 134.

the medical doctrine contained in them is Galenic but is unintelligible without a rudimentary knowledge of Aristotle's cosmological and biological ideas.<sup>43</sup>

The Greek, and later Latin, scholarship outlined above form part of the body of knowledge that was essential for the training of a well-educated medieval physician, as well as contributing in large part to the 'popular' aspects of medieval medicine and its understanding. Popular understandings of the body and of disease would continue to be influenced by folk culture and the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

The economic prosperity of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the Latin West led to increased learning and the creation of the universities.<sup>44</sup> Medicine was one of three higher faculties in the medieval university, alongside Law and Theology. The Arts faculty, in which one would learn grammar, logic and Aristotelian philosophy “provided the basic knowledge medieval intellectuals shared, and [the Arts] were taken for granted in all other intellectual activity; they also formed the linguistic competence of medieval intellectuals and established their idiom of highly technical and precise medieval Latin”.<sup>45</sup> This would not have been possible without direct access to Aristotle's *Libri Naturales* (the *Metaphysics*, *De Anima* and other works on natural philosophy)<sup>46</sup> which became available in the Latin West from the twelfth century in the translation of Gerard of Cremona. By the 1250s Parisian

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<sup>43</sup> Garcia-Ballester 76.

<sup>44</sup> Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg, eds., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 15.

<sup>46</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1935, trans. Hugh Treddenick, Loeb Classical Library 18 (London: Harvard UP, 2006) and Aristotle's *De Anima*, Trans. Ronald Polansky (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007).

masters were already lecturing on the *Libri Naturales*.<sup>47</sup> It is clear that in the universities, at least, the relationship between artistic endeavour and scientific knowledge was extremely close. It is no surprise that educated poets drew on the learned tradition of medieval natural science and medicine as well as on the literary heritage in which they were educated.

The scholastic contribution from the eleventh century onwards was the further systematization of Galenism and the development of medicine as a science, in line with scholarship in other natural philosophical fields such as physics. Garcia-Ballester summarizes this achievement:

...it added, among other things, the following: a new type of relationship between religious knowledge, acquired through faith (*fide tantum*) and human reasoning (*ratione*), acquired by means of such secular sciences as arithmetic, geometry, and natural philosophy in general - a point that was borrowed from Arab intellectuals; the development of a method of inquiry and communication (the *lectio-questio-disputatio* combination); the in-depth study of basic questions concerning the structure of matter (eg. on the theory of the elements); a new system of medical care linked to the university system and controlled by the civil power; and an employment market that guaranteed a connection between the world of knowledge (*theoria-practica*)

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<sup>47</sup> Griet Galle, *Peter of Auvergne: Questions on Aristotle's 'De Caelo' – A Critical Edition with an Interpretative Essay* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003) 31-34.

and that of practice (*operatio*). This process reached maturity, or at least began to do so, in the thirteenth century.<sup>48</sup>

The new development of enquiry and communication is arguably the most important intellectual change. The later medieval medical curriculum consisted of a collection of Hippocratic aphorisms and prognostics, together with the works of Galen and glosses on his work, as well as original texts based on the Galenic system. Medieval medicine was moulded by the vocabulary of Aristotelianism as it took hold of the Latin world:

For the historian of philosophy the chief interest of the language of the translations lies in its contribution to the philosophical vocabulary of medieval and later times. Aristotle became 'the philosopher' and the study of philosophy became practically synonymous with the study of Aristotle, and in this way the Latin philosophical and technical terms chosen by the translators entered into a living philosophical tradition and became part of the language of philosophical discussion.<sup>49</sup>

Thus when the poets in this thesis use intellectual vocabulary they are partaking in an essentially Aristotelian discourse that was immediately comprehensible to their peers. Its use signalled their own understanding of the common framework of medieval natural science and medicine. They used such vocabulary both in its Latin forms and in its popular vernacular derivations. The importance of philosophy to broader medieval life should not be

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48 Garcia-Ballester 78.

49 Kretzmann et al. 68.

underestimated: Luscombe refers to the “remarkable penetration” of philosophy into medieval culture.<sup>50</sup> In its consideration of the language of the body, this thesis demonstrates the remarkable penetration of specifically medical language into literary texts. Chaucer, Dunbar and Henryson made use of this language in contexts that one could characterise as medical; for example, the portrait of the Physician in Chaucer’s *General Prologue*, but also in seemingly inappropriate contexts, such as the vivid portrait of Arcite’s death in the *Knight’s Tale*. In doing so they semantically extend the usefulness of these terms. As discussed, the distinction between practical and theoretical medicine was embedded in the vocabulary itself. Mariken Teeuwen has emphasised the way in which medical vocabulary, too, reflects a separation between the theoretical and practical. She notes, in particular, that in Padua there existed separate chairs for the *medicina theorica* and the *medicina practica*.<sup>51</sup>

The medieval Latin West Aristotelianized Galen in the same way that it Christianized Aristotle. The essence of the Aristotelian approach is summarized by McGrade: “[the Aristotelian method] begins from experience, but - and this is essential - the method of getting from experience to theory is not to collect more data, but rather to think analytically about some small body of experience in order to gain insight into it”.<sup>52</sup> Such an approach is evident in poetic attempts to mirror the language of scholastic writing, for example, in the division of the fart in Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale* (2251-2280). In that passage the process of division is extrapolated from authoritative knowledge rather than considered

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50 David Luscombe, *Medieval Thought*, A History of Western Philosophy 2 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 136.

51 Teeuwen 401-2.

52 Kretzmann et al. 180.



as a speculative or experimental operation. Garcia-Ballester argues that in many ways this was a transformed Galen: medieval medicine represents a certain reading of Galen, and is certainly not the only type of Galenism that could have arisen. Medicine was incorporated into a larger systematized procedure for looking at the universe:

Most influential of all the contributions of Greco-Arabic learning to Western Christendom was the fact that the works of Aristotle, Ptolemy and Galen constituted a complete rational system explaining the universe as a whole in terms of natural causes.<sup>53</sup>

It is also clear that university-educated medical doctors were expected to be men of deep and broad learning – scholars to be respected for their strong knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy as well as for their medical expertise. This was also true of medieval poets, and it will be evident in this thesis that their knowledge included medieval science and medicine, or at least enough of the vocabulary of medieval medicine to create a reasonable simulacrum of real understanding. In this respect they most likely mirror their expected audiences, who were probably familiar with the language of medieval natural philosophy, without necessarily being expert in it. These poets use medical discourse towards artistic ends, including the portrayal of medieval attitudes towards the body and the social implications of such attitudes, rather than in any attempt to develop medical understanding.

The Aristotelian emphasis on causes resulted in the humoral system that is normally associated with Galen. According to the Galenic tradition, the

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53 A. C. Crombie, *Science in the Late Middle Ages 5th-13th Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959) 71.

healthy human body maintained an appropriate balance between four categories of bodily fluid: the sanguineous humor, the choleric humor, the melancholic humor, and the phlegmatic humor. These humors were originally derived from Hippocrates. Aristotle's *De Animalibus* describes health as a balance of qualities and this further contributed to the general perception that good health was the product of a balanced lifestyle.<sup>54</sup> Each humor and its production were associated with a different organ. These humors tended to be identified in evident human bodily fluids, such as blood for the sanguineous and pus for the choleric. Medicine, concerned as it was with the order of the human body, paid particular attention to the most obvious evidence of its porousness; its excretions. Bodily humors are part of the body and yet they signify its physical connection to the broader world outside the body. These humors were thought to be the product of the elemental nature of the physical world. Alongside this humoral complexion, three systems were identified within the human body, each associated with a different bodily organ; the venous system associated with the liver and the faculty of nutrition, the arterial system associated with the heart and vital heat, and the nervous system associated with the brain and the animal faculty.<sup>55</sup> These systems correspond to the Platonic hierarchy of being, the animal faculty being associated only with humans, vital heat being associated with humans and animals, and the faculty of nutrition being associated with humans, animals and plants. These were known as the *temperantia* or bodily qualities. Anatomical knowledge came from

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid 172.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 172.

various sources, but primarily from Galen (and Avicenna following Galen) and from Aristotle.<sup>56</sup> Preference was normally given to Galen, whose anatomical knowledge usually proved to be more accurate. As noted, botanical treatises tended to be used for medical purposes as herbals or medical recipe books. On the other hand, while animal dissection was practiced in place of human dissection for medical purposes, zoological treatises normally served moralistic or didactic purposes. The influence of the heavens on human affairs was also important to the medieval medical tradition. The elements, qualities and complexions were all linked to planets and signs of the Zodiac. The influence of a planet such as Saturn was thought to be capable of producing excessive production of the melancholic humour. Other planets would effect other humours. The trained physician could therefore assess illness according to the movements of the planets and could even predict illness based on astronomical projections. Astronomy also helped the medieval doctor to calculate the most fitting time at which to let blood or otherwise adjust the humoral constitution.

*Maintaining Health: the Humors and Popular Belief*

The rest of this chapter discusses the relationship between medieval medical theory and practice and its complicated relationship with popular belief. The role of religion in shaping attitudes towards the body will be considered in the following chapter. Kretzmann points out that:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid 173.

Galen's fundamental postulate was the Aristotelian teleological notion that all parts of the body were expressly created by God for pre-established purposes, and that all organs functioned in accordance with the divine scheme.<sup>57</sup>

Galen's body, therefore, was an ordered body, and furthermore it was a body whose order had been established by God. For medieval thinkers, the rational order of Galen's system was associated with the Christian God.<sup>58</sup> As discussed, in *The Tale of Melibee* the apparent orderliness of the body was used to justify other ordered systems, such as the body politic. As mentioned, the fundamental assumption behind medieval and, indeed, classical medical theory is that the motions of the heavenly bodies have a direct physical effect on sub-lunar matter. This core assumption, which was the basis of astrological learning, ensured that medieval medicine would focus on the material make-up of the human body as it was thought to be affected by heavenly influences. As a result the body was perceived to be physically influenced by the two major forces of order and disorder; the super-lunary and sub-lunary spheres, respectively. On the one hand the body was highly systematized and ordered, and indeed was deeply connected to the broader universe. On the other hand, the body functioned in the sublunary sphere, an area that was perceived to be more chaotic than the divinely ordered heavens. The potential for a crisis in this model is evident in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, as the influential thinker

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<sup>57</sup> Kretzmann et al 358.

<sup>58</sup> There are important differences between the Christian God and Galen's Demiurge. For an outline of these differences see R. J. Hankinson, "Galen and the Best of All Possible Worlds," *Classical Quarterly* 39 (1989): 206-227.

Boethius (c. 480-524) urges God to impose the stability of divine order on human affairs:

Rapidos rector comprime fluctus

Et quo caelum regis immensum

Firma stabiles foedere terras.

(*Consolation of Philosophy* I.v, 46-48)<sup>59</sup>

The problem for Boethius is that to do so would interfere with free will. It is evident that for the medieval scholar, many of the problems of the body are produced by human behaviour. As such, it makes sense that there was a focus on the maintenance of health through appropriate diet and lifestyle. This focus is apparent in the Mirrors for Princes tradition and specifically in dietaries such as Lydgate's *Dietary*, which is considered later in this chapter.

Religious influences on later medieval thought ensured that moral behaviour was also thought to influence the well-being of the body. Illness was sometimes considered to be a sign of sinful behaviour, although attitudes in this regard were inconsistent, as will be discussed later. By and large a person's physical regimen and their morality appear to have been associated with one another. After all, some of the physical problems associated with poor lifestyle could be associated with the cardinal sins of gluttony, sloth, and lust.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, those forces thought to provide order, such as the planets, also presented a challenge for the physician. The humors of the body meant that

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59 "Ruler, restrain their rushing waves and make the earth/ Steady with that stability of law/ By which you rule the vastness of the heavens." Boethius, *Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1973, trans. H.F. Stewart et al., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978).

60 And this extends to an association between morality and social position. For a discussion of this in Chaucer's *General Prologue* see Gerald Morgan, "Moral and Social Identity and the Idea of Pilgrimage in the *General Prologue*," *The Chaucer Review* 37.4 (2003): 285-314.

patients needed different kinds of attention depending on their sex and their own unique humoral disposition. As a result medical theory focused on individual behaviour and on methods of correcting humoral imbalance caused by planetary forces. In practical terms a temporal method in medieval medicine developed. Medical practitioners saw the body as seasonal in nature, and diagnosis of illness would be incomplete without consideration of the time of year and of the positions of the heavenly bodies.<sup>61</sup> This tended to strengthen the medieval association between the microcosmic man and the macrocosmic universe. The most common example given for this is the medieval practitioner's tendency to conduct treatment at specific times of the day or month. The theory of elements, therefore, came to represent the fundamental key understanding human health. Consequently the maintenance of health became a struggle to maintain humoral, and therefore elemental, balance in one's own body or in the body of the patient.

As mentioned, the medieval doctor tended to look towards the maintenance of health, just as Galen had advised: "In Galen's opinion, bodily health was not unrelated to an upright life and moral practice; hence the physician should intervene in the overall supervision of man".<sup>62</sup> Thus, medieval medical texts prescribe rules for healthy living and, for a modern author, the distinction between scholarly medical advice and advice from literary sources appears to be limited. Poetry in the *Mirrors for Princes* genre gives explicit guidance on physical behaviour but there are examples from the

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<sup>61</sup> Garcia-Ballester 9-10.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 11.

broader *speculum* tradition, such as Gower's *Mirour de l'Omme*,<sup>63</sup> that are technically moral and religious in character, and yet might well have been perceived as being related to the medical treatises. For a medieval audience, the distinction between how to live physically and how to live morally may not have been apparent. Physicians looked to the body of the person to cure itself, rather than assuming that ailments could be treated by herbals in themselves. Where a theoretical physician used herbals, their express purpose was to encourage the body's own process of humoral balance:

For Galen, just as for the followers of Hippocrates, the real starting point of any treatment was the ability of the patient's natural constitution to produce a cure. 'Nature governs our bodies and does everything for the health of the living being' ... The Physician's art simply consists of helping nature in its curative efforts.<sup>64</sup>

The doctor's role was to help the body maintain its natural order and to use nature's own systems to encourage the return of a disordered body to order. The strong causal link between lifestyle and health outcomes in medieval thought is evidenced by the proliferation of dietaries and, from the twelfth century onwards, the *regimen sanitatis*.<sup>65</sup> Such a prescription for healthy living covered the moral and spiritual, as well as the physical well-being, of the patient. It seems that the priest played as important a role as the doctor in the treatment of serious disease, and the care of the soul was at least as important,

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<sup>63</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l'omme: The Mirror of Mankind*, Trans. William Burton Wilson (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992).

<sup>64</sup> Garcia-Ballester 34.

<sup>65</sup> Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Farnham: Sutton, 1995) 37.

if not more important, than the care of the body. Such beliefs illustrate the complex relationship between Galenic medicine, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, and Christianity. In Galen's own writing there is an implied belief that an unhealthy soul leads to an unhealthy body,<sup>66</sup> a position he shares with Plato.<sup>67</sup> It is evidently a belief shared in some of the poetry examined in this thesis. The strong moral undertone to Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* is a direct result of the association, in the medieval imagination, between morality and physical health. This would not have been a feasible belief for Aristotle, however. Galen develops the Platonic notion of the unhealthy soul by suggesting in *De Sectis* that there can be imbalance between the rational and irrational parts of the soul, and that the health of the soul itself lies outside the sphere of activity of the physician. He did not explicitly state his own conception of what constituted the soul, but one can assume it must have been something like the Platonic conception of the soul since he discusses soul and body as if they are separate entities. In medieval practice, the separation tends to be between physical and moral or spiritual well-being, since the late medieval theological understanding of the relationship between soul and body is informed by Aquinas' Aristotelian synthesis of soul and body.<sup>68</sup> In practice, this meant that the individual who wished to remain healthy needed to consider his activities, such as eating, drinking, and exercise, not only from the

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66 Chapters V and VI of Galen's 'An Outline of Empiricism' comment on the soul and health. See Galen, *Three Treatises on the Nature of Science: On the Sects for Beginners, An Outline of Empiricism, On Medical Experience*, Trans. Richard Walzer and Michael Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1985).

67 Books II and VIII of Plato's *The Republic* comment on the unhealthy soul. See *The Republic*, Trans. R.W. Sterling and W.C. Scott (New York: Norton, 1985).

68 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948-1981) Part 1, Qu. 76.



perspective of physical health, but also from the perspective of a moral code of behaviour.

Despite this preventative approach patients did, of course, become sick. The medieval doctor had few diagnostic tools apart from bodily signs. It was thought that bodily signs would indicate, to the physician, which of the body's humors were out of balance. Uroscopy, or the analysis of the urine, was chief among these signs. Diagnosis tended to be more successful than cure, however: "The chief limitation of medieval doctors was, in fact, not that they could not recognize diseases but they could not often cure them".<sup>69</sup> Doctors looked for sources of change in the bodily balance in the *res non naturales* (non-natural things, or things outside the body):

For a medieval intellectual (a natural philosopher), and especially for a physician educated according to the Galenic paradigm, a human body is conceivable only in relation to its physical, social and moral surroundings. This is what medieval physicians - and also natural philosophers - expressed under the heading of 'non-natural things' (*res non naturales*).<sup>70</sup>

From a poet's perspective, this belief is very useful, since it allows for a system of signs to be used in order to indicate a character's temperament and behaviour. The non-natural things are essentially the patient's surroundings: "air and environment, food and drink, sleep and wakefulness, motion and rest, evacuation and repletion, and passions of the mind".<sup>71</sup> Again the body is always

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<sup>69</sup> Crombie 232.

<sup>70</sup> Garcia-Ballester 134.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

framed in terms of its environment, even though the physician's role is to protect the patient's body from its surroundings. A doctor would examine the patient for signs of imbalance, and then attempt to locate the source of this imbalance in the patient's environment. The altered state of the patient consisted of *res praeter naturam* (pathological things). In terms of Aristotelian physics, *res non naturales* are violent forces that alter the nature of the patient's constitution. This concern with the Aristotelian causation of illness is Galenic in flavour, but is largely the contribution of Avicenna (c.980-1037), the Arab scholar who made the greatest effort to Aristotelianize Galenic medicine:

To define health in terms of Aristotelian causality was the great conceptual development offered by Avicenna in his *Canon* [Avicenna's encyclopedia, also known as the *Sifa*]. 'Medicine deals with the health of the human body... we must know the causes of health and illness if we wish to make it a *scientia*... The causes are but four: material, efficient, formal and final' [Canon bk1, fen 1, chap 1, p.7b]. The material causes coincide in part with the already mentioned *res naturales* (spirits, humours, limbs); the efficient causes with the contents of the *res non naturales*; the formal causes with the remaining of the *res naturales* that are more closely associated with the elements (complexion, virtues, and compositions); the final causes with the physician's specific

actions (the so called *operationes*) that have health as their objective.<sup>72</sup>

Further sources of illness were sometimes identified, although often in a rather vague manner. Astrological influences were considered important, as were corruptions of the air. In this respect Galenic medicine was compatible with ideas formed in the Anglo-Saxon period. The complicated nature of these more vague ideas about corruption in the air, for example in times of plague, are evident in the common assumption that plague was a punishment for human sin.<sup>73</sup> It will be apparent in the analyses to follow that poets, too, looked for causes in the *res non naturales*. Invariably they blamed ill health on external forces, even if those external forces were brought into being by the character's own choices and actions. Chaucer provides rare examples of characters for whom the *res non naturales* might be considered to be beyond their control, for example in the case of Arcite (I. 2684-5). Even in Arcite's case, there is an argument to be made that his downfall is the product of his moral behaviour.<sup>74</sup>

Apart from the physician, medieval society produced other types of healers. Medieval Latin distinguished between different types of *medicus* or medical practitioner. On the one hand there was the *physicus* or physician, whose activity was largely non-invasive and followed the lines outlined above. On the other hand there was also the *cirurgicus* or surgeon. Surgery was a separate discipline from medicine, primarily as a result of Church restrictions

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72 Ibid 139. Also see Avicenna, *A Treatise on the Canon of Medicine of Avicenna: Incorporating a Translation of the First Book*, trans. O. Cameron Gruner (London: Luzac and Co., 1930).

73 John Carroll, "The Role of Guilt in the Formation of Modern Society: England 1350-1800," *British Journal of Sociology* 32.4 (1981): 464.

74 See, for example, Jeffrey Helterman, "The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of *The Knight's Tale*," *ELH* 38.4 (1971): 493-511.

on clerical contact with blood and internal organs. Major figures in medieval surgery were Henry de Mondeville and Guy of Chauliac, whose 1360 *Chirurgia Magna* was of some importance in the fourteenth century and after.<sup>75</sup> Many historians of medicine have noted the relatively high rate of success in medieval surgery compared to medieval medicine.<sup>76</sup> Surgical procedures ranged from the simple removal of sores to amputation and even the removal of tumours. It is likely that surgeons had greater opportunities to practice their procedures, since so many victims of invasive injuries were provided by the medieval battle-field. It is interesting that in the poetry of Chaucer, Dunbar and Henryson, at least one of whom had probably seen battle, medicine is largely associated with the physician rather than the surgeon. Critics have pointed to Absolon's profession as a part-time barber in the *Miller's Tale*, but the reference appears to be made to facilitate the later joke when he uses a red-hot poker on Nicholas' anus (l. 3806-10).<sup>77</sup> Apart from *medici* and *cirurgici*, there also existed a broad spectrum of other lay healers. Midwives had an extremely important role, and probably had much expertise gained through experience and apprenticeship. Midwifery did not have a formal role in university medicine and there is little evidence for any textual tradition. Women's healing role is hinted at in the poets here examined, but women are not associated with learned medicine, and indeed Chaucer's Alys is positively hostile towards learning. Other healers also lie largely outside the bounds of recorded textual

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75 Guy de Chauliac, *The Chirurgie of Guy de Chauliac*, EETS OS 265, 1971.

76 This view was established early in the modern history of medicine. See, for example, James Joseph Walsh, *The Popes and Science: The History of Papal Relations to Science During the Middle Ages and Down to Our Own Time*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1908) 172.

77 Kathryn Walls, "Absolon as Barber Surgeon," *Chaucer Review* 35.4 (2001): 391-98.

evidence and, while aspects of their learning may survive in the lyrics and herbals, there is no evidence of their contribution to the scholarly tradition. One likely aspect of other forms of healing, of which we do have some evidence, is magic. Magic was already evident in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, but it also had classical origins. Michelle Sweeney has discussed the relationship between magic, religion and philosophy in the fourteenth century. She argues that when Chaucer uses the term *magyk natureel* he “simply reflects the shifting parameters between magic, medicine, and science in his own period”.<sup>78</sup> Her discussion highlights Chaucer’s sophisticated relationship to his contemporary discourse and professional terminology.

Many commentators have noted the rise of astrology, natural magic, and the occult in the later Middle Ages. One contributing factor was Arabic influence on the Latin West. For example, Alkind, the 9th century Arab Neoplatonist, in his *Theory of the Magic Art*, maintained that “physical and occult causes were ... equally able to be responsible for physical phenomena”.<sup>79</sup> Despite the apparent rationality of antique medicine Greek medicine did have some magical traditions. Greek writers disagreed over Medea, for example. Ovid portrays her rejuvenating her uncle Aeson through her magical powers (*Metamorphoses* VII)<sup>80</sup> while others, such as Diodorus Siculus (*Bibliotheca Historica*, 4.51.3)<sup>81</sup> and Apollodorus (*Argonautica* 1.9.23),<sup>82</sup> explain that this was trickery rather than magic. This distinction between magic and trickery arises again in

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78 Michelle Sweeney, *Magic in Medieval Romance from Chretien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000) 153.

79 Crombie 68.

80 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).

81 Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, trans. Charles L. Sherman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1952).

82 Apollodorus of Athen, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

Chaucer. Plato remarks on the role of charms and incantations in healing (*Symposium* 263).<sup>83</sup> In Roman thought, for example in Pliny, as Flint notes, “there lies a borderland in which magicians and healers may come close to one another”.<sup>84</sup> This Roman tradition contributed to Anglo-Saxon medicine. Religion also contributed to some of the more occult aspects of medieval medical practice. Karen Jolly notes that “the issue in early medieval Europe was not so much whether words had power or invisible spiritual forces existed - they certainly did in the minds of most Christian thinkers - but *whose* words and *whose* spiritual forces (divine or demonic)”.<sup>85</sup> One could see the Church’s role in the Middle Ages as replacing pagan ideas about demonic forces (flying demons) with the role of divine forces, or demonic forces as imagined by the church rather than by earlier pagan systems of belief. Jolly’s assessment is equally true of the role of magic in medical practice in the fourteenth century. The power of words was acknowledged, and Jolly’s assessment is also true of later medieval practice:

While on the one hand, many sermon writers roundly condemned the continued practice of devil worship found in auguries, invocations and charms, they also urged Christians to resort to the powerful signs and incantations of the cross, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, using these blessings over herbs instead of diabolical pagan ones.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1999).

<sup>84</sup> V. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 27.

<sup>85</sup> Karen Jolly, Catharina Raudvere and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 3, The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe (London: Athlone, 2002) 16.

<sup>86</sup> Jolly et al. 19.

The mix of pagan influence, Christianity, and classical science that Jolly so cogently describes, results in a spectrum of practice. Magic was intellectualized by scholars in the twelfth century and after, both in their exploration or their condemnation of it. Much of what constitutes magic, as we encounter it in, for example, the *Lais* of Marie de France, is informed by this intellectual tradition, but medical practices probably also maintained more aspects of the older tradition and practices. The natural magic referred to in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale is more a reference to the application of rational principles rather than to magic in the occult sense. Furthermore, the Christianization of many of these practices mean that they will often read as folk Christian tradition – whether we describe them as magical practices or folk Christian practices is less important than being conscious of the shared influences. Karen Jolly notes:

Despite continued assertions from churchmen condemning magic as heretical, demonic, and ultimately ill-fated and illusory, and despite the rise of a new rationalism, references to magic that actually works proliferate, particularly magic relying on the power of Christian rituals to coerce spiritual forces like demons to do the will of the practitioner.<sup>87</sup>

The history of magic and medical practice in the late medieval period is important to this study because it charts a plot that is near-parallel to that of literary culture. Medical and magical learning are vernacularized just as literature itself is vernacularized, resulting in a similar opening up of a formerly much more exclusive sphere. Jolly notes "... a proliferation of self-help manuals

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid 23.

in the vernacular offering remedies and divinatory techniques, popularizing what was once a magic tradition exclusive to the literate clergy”, and argues that “...late medieval popular magic reflects a sophisticated synthesis of folk ways, classical medicine, and Christian liturgy in its use of herbs, blessings or adjurations, and ritualistic behaviours”.<sup>88</sup> Such popular synthesis, I will argue in later chapters, is evident in poetry. Tensions between scholarly knowledge and folk tradition are apparent, but also apparent is the common accommodation found for both of them.

### *Medical Lyrics and Medical Poetry*

A popular tradition in which scholarly learning was synthesised with other modes of discourse was that of the medieval medical lyric. Garcia-Ballester notes that “...the written records as we have them are only a limited reflection of a much richer oral culture”. He refers to non-scholastic forms of medicine as “the mixed bag that is known by the name 'Fachliteratur’”.<sup>89</sup> Such descriptions show, at least, that non-scholastic medicine is far less easy to delimit in terms of the theoretical content that it contained, and in terms of the types of literature that it entails. Non-scholastic medicine might be said to entail all those texts that inform medieval discourse, but are not in use in the universities. It might be said to include late herbals and medical lyrics, but might also include some medical handbooks, which, while scholastic in content,

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Garcia-Ballester 17.



are nevertheless intended to provide shorthand versions of the broader medical theory and knowledge concerned. Lyrics normally summarize aspects of Galenic medicine, or prescribe treatment for various illnesses. These herbal treatments have much in common with the content of prose medical tracts. They often, but not always, prescribe treatment according to humoral theory, and their language is often that of elemental balance; hot, cold, wet and dry. One fifteenth-century lyric, for example, describes the humoral system itself. In this lyric the four humors each speak in turn to the audience in the first person, providing a description of their fundamental characteristics. The sanguine humor states:

Deliberal I am, lovinge and gladde,  
 Laghing and playinge, full seld I am sad;  
 Singinge, full fair of colour, bold to fight,  
 Hote and moist, beninge, sanguine I hight. (Lambeth Palace  
 523)<sup>90</sup>

This lyric personifies each of the humors. In doing so it provides a key to human behaviour as it might be affected by an excess of each. Thus, while the humoral characteristics were well-known enough that it might not have been necessary, a poet could turn to a lyric like this for a shorthand description of a character of a certain type.

Others combined the Latin and vernacular traditions in verse, to create poetry that shows the bilingual nature of fourteenth-century literary and scholarly life, and, to the benefit of anyone interested in the transmission of

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<sup>90</sup> Luria and Hoffman no. 112.

medical vocabulary, provides a simple lexicon of Latin medical terms and their English equivalents. One account of the sanguine humor, for example, is as follows:

Sanguineus: *Natura pingues isti sunt atque forantes*  
*Atque rumores cupiunt audire frequenter*  
*Hos Venis & brachijs delectant fercula risus*  
*Et facit hos hillares et dulcea verba loquentes*  
*Omnibus hij studiis habiles sunt ac magis apti*  
*Qualibet ex causa nec hos leuiter mouet Ira*  
*Largus amans hillaris ridens Rubri que coloris*  
*Cantans carnosus satis audax atque benignus*

Of yiftis large in love hathe gret delite  
 Jocund and glad ay of lawyng chere  
 Of Ruddy coloure meynt somedeale with whight  
 Disposud be kynd to be a chauntere  
 Hardy I nowe manly and bold of chere  
 Of the Sanguine also it is a signe  
 To be demur Riche curteys and benigne. (Trinity  
 College R.3.19)

This lyric is sometimes associated with Lydgate. Like the previous lyric, this shows the common understanding of the association between behaviour and humoral temperament. As evidence of the level to which such lyric poetry was read in the late Middle Ages, one might note that the above poem was

transfigured into prose in James Yonge's (fl.1405-1434) 1422 work, *The Governance of Prynces*.<sup>91</sup> At least one lyric was in circulation which, rather than explaining the humors, briefly summarizes Medicine's mythical origins and the essentials of its practice:

Phebus fonde first the craft of medicine  
 By touch of pous and urine inspections.  
 Esculapius taght the doctrine  
 To know the qualities of the four compliccions,  
 Of electuaries, drages, and pociouns.  
 Among all other ther is nothing nor mete  
 To the help of man then temperat diete. (Huntington Library HU  
 1051, f. 49v)<sup>92</sup>

In this lyric we find a description of the doctor's method of diagnosis; he would examine "pous and urine" for evidence of excessive humours. Emphasis is placed on "temperat diete", which was felt to be one of the most important factors in maintaining the correct balance among the "four compliccions" or humours. Such lyric medical writing appears to have been very popular. These lyrics form a convincing line of connection between the scholastic texts that we normally associate with medieval medicine and the poetry that is analysed in this thesis. It seems likely that much of the medical knowledge that we can associate with medieval poets comes from the lyric tradition, but we cannot rule out some knowledge of the scholastic tradition.

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<sup>91</sup> Robert Steele, ed., *Three Prose Versions of Secreta Secretorum*, EETS ES 74 (1898) 119-248.

<sup>92</sup> Luria and Hoffman no. 113.

It is important to consider the role of the church in the development of attitudes towards the unstable body and to acknowledge its influence on medical thought. In Scotland, for example, "...the sphere of the Church almost wholly contained the sphere of medical practice as delivered outside the domestic sphere by other than family members or local worthies... For the moment, the social construction of medicine was the religious construction of medicine".<sup>93</sup> Some critics have argued that the increased interest in medicine from the twelfth century onwards might be attributed to changes in theological focus:

Necessity can be a motive only when it is recognized, and among the most important reasons for [Greek medicine's] recognition in the West must be included the activist tradition of Western theology. By asserting the infinite worth of responsibility of each person, this theology placed a value upon the care of each immortal soul and therefore upon the charitable relief of physical suffering, and gave dignity to labour and a motive for innovation. The inventiveness that resulted produced the practical skill and flexibility of mind in dealing with technical problems to which modern science is the heir.<sup>94</sup>

On the one hand the church can be seen as a positive influence in the development of medical practice. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on the value of the individual led to a growth in the sense of responsibility for the ill

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<sup>93</sup> Helen M. Dinghall, *A History of Scottish Medicine: Themes and Influences* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003) 41.

<sup>94</sup> Crombie 243.

and needy. On the other hand, Christianity did much to encourage the perception that ill health was a product of moral weakness. Medieval Christian moral theory supposed that character was evident in physiognomy, and that “punishments and rewards for one’s soul are administered through corporeal pleasures and punishments”.<sup>95</sup> While physical descriptions might open a window into a character’s moral state in later literatures in a metaphorical sense, in medieval literature such a judgement could be considered as supported by natural science. While Walter Clyde Curry’s strong emphasis on the importance of physiognomy is now considered excessive by many critics, there is no doubt that this interpretation of illness and disfigurement was at least available to the medieval audience.<sup>96</sup> Carol Rawcliffe notes with some sympathy that confusion with regard to the causes of illness must also have been shared by the medieval patient:

...just as the humble penitent could never be entirely sure of the efficacy of his devotions, so the patient must often have turned desperately from one projected cure to the next, in a vain search for relief.<sup>97</sup>

The following chapter will consider, among other topics, the role of the church in the development of positive and negative attitudes towards the body, specifically in the context of gender. A consideration of moral law and scientific understanding in the Middle Ages might lead one to think of medieval society as defined by some certainty as to how human health operates. In fact it is

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95 Erving Goffman, *Behaviour in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Press) 5.

96 Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968).

97 Rawcliffe 58.

apparent that there was a great deal of uncertainty for theoreticians, medical practitioners, and indeed patients. Rawcliffe notes that “... we may assume a good deal of theoretical teaching was either abandoned or ignored by those who regularly dealt with the sick”,<sup>98</sup> and the same is apparent in the range of influences that act upon medieval poets as they discuss the body’s infirmities, from the medico-scientific to the moral, alongside folk tradition and sheer wonder.

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98 Ibid 59.

## Chapter 2: Medieval and Modern Theories of the Body

In the previous chapter, the development of medical discourses of the body was surveyed. An examination of medical discourse and practices reveals that much of the language of the body in the Middle Ages was focused on body-anxiety. Medical discourse was developed in an attempt to come to terms with the body and its functions and was part of a system of knowledge that hoped to prolong people's lives and to make sense of the dangers to the body in the physical world. Later chapters will, in looking at the poetry of Chaucer, Henryson and Dunbar, consider the ways in which their language reflects similar anxieties about the body and also how they used such anxieties to artistic ends. In order to understand such anxiety, however, it is important to move beyond medical discourse and to consider the broader framework of thought that constituted the medieval understanding of the body and, indeed, man's place in the universe. The body was defined not just medically, but also using the broader framework of natural science implicit in medical theory. Along with this the medieval understanding of the body, even when understood in terms of natural science, was fundamentally religious. This chapter will begin with a consideration of the term 'body' as it is used in the Middle Ages and in the modern critical discourse that has influenced the readings of the poets examined in this thesis. Body-anxiety will then be considered in light of two important issues, gender and health. While health has already been considered from a medical perspective, it is also necessary to note the other factors that were thought to influence health, and to acknowledge the complex relationship between health and gendered

discourse. This will allow for a return to the discussion of religious approaches to the body in the Middle Ages and, in turn, a consideration of the implications of twentieth- and twenty-first century body theory for this thesis.

### *What is the Body?*

Even if the term *body* is restricted to the human body, it is necessarily a word with contested meaning. It is clear that, in twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism, much effort has been spent on negotiating different meanings for the body itself. These will be considered in greater depth later in this chapter. In medieval thought, despite the development of the extensive medico-theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, the body is also multi-dimensional. While individual speakers might have had a clear sense of the word's meaning in the context of their own usage, there was certainly no universal concept of the body available to a medieval poet. Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes the situation:

It would be no more correct to say that medieval doctors, rabbis, alchemists, prostitutes, wet nurses, preachers, and theologians had "a" concept of "the body" than it would be to say that Charles Darwin, Beatrix Potter, a poacher, and the village butcher had "a" concept of "the rabbit".<sup>1</sup>

Bynum makes an important point; there is no single concept of the body in the Middle Ages. As she puts it; "even within what we would call discourse

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22.1 (1995): 8.



communities, ideas about matter, body, and person would conflict and contradict".<sup>2</sup> When medieval scholars spoke of the body, and they did not always speak in agreement, they tended to think in terms of either gender or health. Their scholastic inclination towards categorization extended to the bodies of people in society. A body, therefore, was always implicitly either a healthy balanced body or an unhealthy imbalanced body. It was also always either a male body or a female body. The existence of eunuchs only served to emphasise this distinction further. A consideration of these dichotomies will allow for an evaluation of the matrix of ideas within which Chaucer, Henryson and Dunbar locate themselves and their texts.

Medieval writers saw the body through the lenses of religious discourse or natural scientific discourse. A modern reader of medieval poetry, however, will very likely be struck by the two major dichotomies mentioned above. One (male-female) is apparently self-evident in nature, and the other (health-illness) is, for most, an ongoing concern of everyday human experience. Both are symptomatic of a concern for body-control or at the very least for body-categorization. In both cases one aspect of the dichotomy is positive in its connotations for most scholars. While this can vary according to context, there are obvious overall trends. Female bodies, for example, were generally considered to be inferior to male bodies, at least in their capacity for control by reason. If all bodies were a liability to the mind or soul, the female body represented the more severe danger both to the woman herself and to men. Yet many authors, including those covered here, would also simultaneously use the

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<sup>2</sup> Walker Bynum 7.

female body as a symbol of virtue and purity when necessary. An example of this, which will be discussed in greater depth in the analyses to follow in later chapters, is Henryson's *Annunciation*, in which Mary's body "fra carnal cryme ... clene is" (*Annunciation*, 64).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless Mary's body constitutes a special case, and its purity is, in fact, a sign of its exceptional nature. At the same time all women's bodies share in the aura of Mary's purity, despite their own fallen impurity. In the case of health and illness there are obvious positive connotations of health, and yet illness and suffering could, in some circumstances, be interpreted as a test from God, lending the sufferer a grace that is lacking in the healthy.<sup>4</sup> While one aspect of each binary relationship tends to be seen in a more positive light, the poets examined in this thesis use alternatively positive and negative associations in any situation in which it is useful. It is apparent, therefore, that for poets as well as scholars, these binaries are limited, and it is largely a poetic decision as to whether one or other perception is more appropriate. Their approach to these commonly accepted dichotomies, and the authority that goes along with them, mirrors their approach to the authoritative discourse of medicine. They tend not to challenge commonly accepted knowledge directly, but their poetry frequently highlights the existence of such social frameworks and occasionally points to hypocrisy in their application. Barbara Bowen notes that in the 32 continental collections of jokes between 1340 and 1600 that she examined, taboo humour tended to be either sexual or

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3 All reference to Henryson and Dunbar are to J. A. Tasioulas, ed., *The Makars: The Poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 1999).

4 Carol Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006) 59. Rawcliffe notes that, as Hugh of St. Lincoln recognized, suffering was "an elevated rung on the ladder of perfection, which bestowed upon the leper a glowing 'internal splendour'".

scatological.<sup>5</sup> If humour is evidence of areas of tension in common thought, then these two types of humour demonstrate a keen interest in gender and health respectively.

Both dichotomies are of central concern to the major discourses of the body in the Middle Ages; religious discourse and natural-scientific discourse. Religious discourse can be broadly associated with the Church and with biblical authority, while natural-scientific discourse was the domain of scholastic learning and the learning associated with the inheritance of Greek natural philosophy. Both were learned discourses and extensive manuscript evidence remains for each. In practice, of course, there was a large overlap in the scholarship of each mode of discourse, with many scholars of the natural sciences heavily influenced by the strong power of the Church over lay affairs. Alongside these arose a literary discourse of the body that encompassed romance ideals, with largely erotic concerns. Nevertheless the literary discourse of the body was heavily influenced by the two scholarly discourses as well as by romance. It should be noted that, in highlighting these dichotomies, this thesis reflects the concerns of contemporary critical theory. However, even though medieval scholars might not explicitly see their own understanding of the body along these lines, there is ample evidence that, in fact, they tended to approach the problem of the body from either the perspective of health or of gender.

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5 Barbara C. Bowen, "The 'Honorable Art of Farting' in Continental Renaissance Literature," *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*, ed. Jeff Perself and Russell Ganim (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 1-13.

*The Body and Gender in the Middle Ages*

The scholarly basis of each of these binary relationships will now be considered. Contrary to many modern critical approaches to the body, from the medieval perspective the dichotomous and absolute relationship between male and female was natural (medical-scientific) and set in place by God (theological). There was thought to be a natural God-given power-relationship between the two genders that could not be overturned and this was central to both schools of thought. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century concerns with and doubts about the very existence of gender as a simple dichotomous relationship were not present, at least in the mainstream, in medieval Western thought. Such concerns were occasionally apparent in poetry, but had a poet wished to challenge intellectual norms he would have been contradicting an overwhelming consensus. There is also a valid argument to be made that in a society which fundamentally accepts binary gender as God-given, to suggest otherwise would simply be outside the realms of imaginative possibility. Nevertheless, some poetry does indicate that this dichotomy was occasionally challenged by individuals who did not fully fit into accepted categories. The poems that look at this problem show the level of discomfort that gender trouble could cause. The examination of people who challenge medieval ideas of gender normality is largely confined to poetry and goes against the grain of scholarly norms. Also, when the poets here examined did raise the possibility of something like a queer-gendered space, they were not arguing for it as a positive development, although they were able to humanize troubling subjects, at least allowing for the

possibility of audience sympathy. Rather, poets displayed anxiety about it (as did Chaucer in the *Pardoner's Tale*) or used accusations of gender-subversion abusively (as did Dunbar in the *Flyting*). While one might, in the post twentieth-century critical environment, need to ask if 'men' and 'women' are natural kinds<sup>6</sup>, this was the core assumption about gender in the Middle Ages: these natural kinds had been divinely established for Christian society's as recounted in the Bible. The theological basis for the existence of the relationship between man and woman, and for male superiority within that relationship, is based on the authority of *Genesis*. It is a relationship, however, that is rationalised by reference to their actions as man and woman, the very actions that lead to the Fall. Before the Fall there is no such hierarchy. It is clear that the power relationship between men and women is a product of sin and is appropriate to the fallen world rather than being a part of the initial design of the Garden of Eden:

et ait faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram et  
praesit piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et bestiis universaeque  
terrae omnique reptili quod movetur in terra / et creavit Deus  
hominem ad imaginem suam ad imaginem Dei creavit illum  
masculum et feminam creavit eos (*Genesis* 1. 26-27).<sup>7</sup>

Here man is not yet superior; both the male *and* the female are created in God's image, although the implication is that man is created first. The story of the

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<sup>6</sup> Rom Harre, *Physical Being: A Theory for a Corporeal Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 42-60.

<sup>7</sup> All references to the Vulgate Bible are to *Biblia Sacra: iuxta Vulgata Versionem*, ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994). English translations are taken from *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha: King James Version*, ed. David Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005): "And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth. And God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him: male and female he created them".

Garden of Eden provides the rationale for male superiority, since it was Eve who first succumbed to temptation (*Genesis*, 3.6). Theologians expanded on this rationale, and used the arguments of natural philosophers to do so, but the root of the argument lies here. Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle in his contention, for example, that women are the product of a defective seed (*Summa Theologica* I, qu. 92, art. 1, ad. 1).<sup>8</sup> He also argues, however, that women are, nevertheless, a part of God's plan. Medieval theologians in fact based their rationale for the inferiority of women not simply on Biblical sources but also on the pagan natural philosophers who shaped their thought. The medieval Western belief that men should have dominance over women, or that women are inherently inferior in certain ways, is not solely a Christian invention. Rather its roots in classical philosophy are well-established, and are Greek in origin. Again Aquinas synchronizes Christian teaching (such as St. Paul's command that women should not teach) with Aristotelian thought. He argues that women are not made in the image of God in the same way as men (*Summa Theologica* I, qu. 93, art. 4 ad. 1). For Aquinas, a cultural feature of women is taken to be naturally ordained; he states that women's long hair is a divine sign of their inferiority to men (*Summa Theologica* Supplement, qu. 28, art. 3 ad. 1). When it comes to the body, one can with some confidence state that if there was a battle between biblical thought and Greek thought in the minds of medieval men about how to think of the body, it was Greek thought that won the day. In practice there was no such battle, since a reading of the Bible which did not make a case for male superiority would need to have taken place in the absence of Greek philosophy, and in practice both

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8 All references to *Summa Theologica* are to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948-1981).

contributed to medieval thought simultaneously. For late medieval Christians the Bible was always already a text that was read in light of Greek philosophy, mediated through Latin translations. It could be argued that Genesis can be interpreted to offer less justification for the notion that men are naturally superior to women, but in synchrony with Aristotelian thought the idea of male superiority was much more effective. Some critics have argued that the denigration of the body in western thought is not a product of biblical influence. Donn Welton, for example, sketches the core concerns of major western systems of thought up to the present day. According to Welton the Bible's core concerns are linked to desire, Plato's and Aristotle's to materiality, Hobbes' and Descartes' to Mechanism, Kant's and Hegel's to sensibility, and Foucault's and Ricoeur's to systems of power. Welton's summary simplifies but also clarifies some of the different ways in which the body has been constructed in Western thought. Welton argues that the Bible, rather than denigrating the body like much of Greek and medieval philosophy, in fact stresses "the multidimensional constitution of bodily life".<sup>9</sup> He notes that "the Reformation was an effort to extricate the kernel of the Christian message from its illegitimate involvement with the Greek tradition".<sup>10</sup> Illegitimate or not, later medieval philosophy was deeply influenced by the Greek tradition, and when the Bible was called upon to explicate issues of gender, it was interpreted on the terms of Greek philosophy.

While the previous chapter examined the medical understanding of the body, philosophical attitudes to gender still need to be addressed. The body itself was a matter of tension in Christian thinking, and much of this was informed by

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9 Donn Welton, ed., *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 230.

10 Ibid 231.

classical thought. Neither Plato nor Aristotle provide particularly positive accounts of the origins of women. Plato's *Timaeus* and *Laws* communicate his view that women are essentially an inferior version of men.<sup>11</sup> There is no evidence that he is particularly vindictive towards women, but he feels that while they are capable of taking part in all the same activities, they will always be the inferior partner. He notes elsewhere that women will always be inferior partners in public affairs.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle comes to very similar conclusions, but he is actually far more negative in his view of women. Aristotle's ideas have their basis in his humoral understanding of human anatomy, as outlined in the previous chapter. He believes women to be cooler in humoral terms than men and they are therefore, according to Aristotle, inferior. Women, he argues, are essentially infertile males and as such they are signified by lack or absence, whereas men are signified by surplus. This is the argument that would later influence Aquinas. Elizabeth Grosz traces Plato's somatophobia (fear of bodily matter) through to Aristotle's application of it to the male/ female binary:

Plato sees matter itself as a denigrated and imperfect version of the Idea. The body is a betrayal of and a prison for the soul, reason, or mind. For Plato, it was evident that reason should rule over the body and over the irrational or appetitive functions of the soul.<sup>13</sup>

Here reason might stand for masculinity, and matter for femininity. One need only look to Plato's *Cratylus* for evidence of the emotional relationship to the

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11 Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000) and *The Laws*, trans. A.E. Taylor (Dent: Dutton, 1960) iv.

12 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. R.W. Sterling and W.C. Scott (New York: Norton, 1985) 455d.

13 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 5.



body that tinged his philosophy.<sup>14</sup> He clearly shares the tradition of the Orphic priests; and in the *Gorgias* (493a) he makes overt the relationship between *soma* (body) and *sema* (dungeon).<sup>15</sup> Grosz notes that Aristotle extends this tradition:

...maternity is regarded as a mere housing, receptacle, or nurse of being rather than a co-producer... in the case of reproduction [Aristotle] believed that the mother provided the formless, passive, shapeless matter which, through the father, was given form, shape and contour, specific features and attributes it otherwise lacked. The binarization of the sexes, the dichotomization of the world and of knowledge has been effected already at the threshold of Western reason.<sup>16</sup>

This dichotomy established, or at least institutionalized, by Aristotle is the keystone of western medieval philosophical thought on gender and the body. One might notice that the above summary of Aristotle's attitudes to gender apply equally to Aquinas and, indeed, Aquinas integrated Aristotle, but in this respect made few changes to the Aristotelian doctrine. It underlies both religious and medical debate on male and female bodies and it provided a justification for assuming men to be superior to women. In reproduction, male bodies are associated with form while female bodies provide mere passive matter. Nevertheless reproduction itself was also suspicious to many medieval thinkers, in particular St. Augustine.<sup>17</sup>

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14 Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

15 Eric Voegelin, "The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*," *Review of Politics* 11.4 (1949): 495.

16 Grosz 5.

17 For a discussion of medieval sexuality and theological attitudes see David Brown, "Body as Graced or Vile: Tensions in the Christian Vision," *The Body and Arts*, eds. Corinne Saunders, Ulrika Maude and Jane Macnaughton (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 25-38.

In cultural terms this was further supported by the functional roles of each gender in medieval society, which only served to add further weight to the theological or philosophical argument. Divine order appeared to guide human affairs. It is clear that such a view of the world is welcome to the medieval theologian. Aquinas argued that divine will was evident in everyday human affairs:

...Just as the actions of natural things proceed from natural powers, so do human actions proceed from the human will. In natural things it behooved the higher to move the lower to their actions by the excellence of the natural power bestowed on them by God; and so in human affairs also the higher must move the lower by their will in virtue of a divinely established authority. Now to move by reason and will is to command. Wherefore just as in virtue of the divinely established natural order the lower natural things need to be subject to the movement of the higher, so too in human affairs, in virtue of the order of natural and divine law, inferiors are bound to obey their superiors (*Summa Theologica* I, qu 78, art 4 ad 1).

In this instance Aquinas is speaking in broader terms than simply the relationship between men and women, but his view of natural order extends to gender relations. The importance of the impact of this understanding of male and female relationships and the relative value of their bodies cannot be over-emphasized. It will be apparent in the work of each of the poets examined in this thesis that Aquinas' understanding of the nature of men and women is, for them, the norm. Henryson and Dunbar tend not to challenge this, and these norms are

reflected in their attitudes. Chaucer's characters, on the other hand, sometimes question whether this social norm is divinely intended.

### *The Body and Society*

There is a complex relationship between the understanding of the body of the individual and the understanding of the nature of society itself. Mary Douglas notes that "the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived":

The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other... The human body is always treated as an image of society and ... there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension.... Bodily control is an expression of social control...<sup>18</sup>

One can argue, for example, that Aquinas' decision that women's long hair constitute a part of their natural body rather than their cultural behaviour is, in fact, a product of the restraint of the social body over the physical body. Indeed the social body constrains perceptions not only of the physical body, but also of the physical universe. Medieval natural science ordered the physical universe in a manner that mirrors the social order of medieval hierarchical society. The notion that bodily control is an expression of social control is fundamental to this

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, (1970; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 361.

thesis. In relation to this, I would like to extend an idea already implicit in Douglas's work. Not only is the physical control of the body an extension of social control but, in fact, control of *perceptions* of the body and discussions of the body is also an extension of social control. These perceptions are the everyday tools of the poet, for if social control extends to ways of speaking about the body, then these tensions should (and in fact do) play out in poetic texts. As Mary Douglas puts it:

The two bodies are the self and society; sometimes they are so near as to be almost merged; sometimes they are far apart. The tension between them allows the elaboration of meanings.<sup>19</sup>

It is for this reason that the body is so frequently called upon to reflect social order and occasionally to question it. This is evident in the *Tale of Melibee* (as discussed), but also in the work of the Scottish poets examined in this thesis. In medieval society two allegorical models existed to contribute to the perception of state as body. On the one hand there was an ecclesiastical tradition of associating the Church with the body of Christ, and on the other hand there was the classical notion of the 'body politic' which had developed and changed throughout the Middle Ages. The body, with its human head at the highest point, and with its superior functions residing in the head, serves as a useful metaphor for hierarchical structures. The notion of the Church as body is evident in Pope Boniface VIII's 1302 papal bull, *Unam Sanctam*.<sup>20</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz finds in this image the precise precedent of the medieval conception of the king's two bodies

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas 367.

<sup>20</sup> Boniface VIII, 1302, "Unam Sanctam," *Medieval Sourcebook*, 5 May 2009, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/b8-unam.html>>.

(ie. the king himself and the position of Kingship).<sup>21</sup> The classical notion of the body-politic was also hugely influential, however. The image appears in Plato's *Republic* (bk 1.) and in the Middle Ages it is very common in the Mirrors for Princes tradition. Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*<sup>22</sup> is a good example of the phenomenon, and it is outlined explicitly in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the Body Politic*.<sup>23</sup> Whereas body politic imagery uses the body to justify social order, this thesis will extend that analysis to look at how bodies themselves were used to reflect acceptance or rejection of the existing social order. Rather than the structure of society being justified by the body, in this case the treatment of people is justified by the apparent structure of the universe. The opinions of the two great theologian-philosophers of the Middle Ages, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by each of the philosophical views above. Scientists and theologians in the medieval period built upon and shared their general conclusions. The notion that women are inferior to men was not so much an argument in the Middle Ages as an in-built prejudice that could not but inform a poet's writing.

### *Gender Identity, Medicine and Religion*

Although medicine has been discussed in chapter one, it is also important to consider the relationship between medicine and religion in the Middle Ages.

Medical thought in the Middle Ages was largely in accordance with the teachings

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21 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 194.

22 Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth, Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999).

23 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, ed. Kate Langdon Forhan, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).

of the Church. This is not surprising since the teachings of the Church were a product of scientific thinking as well as of biblical influence. In this mode of discourse, too, women were considered to be the inferior partner. This was manifest not so much in value-judgments, but rather in the ways in which human anatomy was considered in a relativistic fashion, with male anatomy as the norm and female anatomy as an anomaly. Women's bodies were defined in terms of lack. Victoria Bergvall calls this the *deficit perspective* on gender.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Nancy Partner notes that eunuchs (one type of person that troubled medieval gender norms) were still constructed as male in medieval France. While women were partially constructed in terms of their lack of male genitals, it would be an over-simplification to suggest that a lack of penis was all that constituted the medieval understanding of female gender identity.<sup>25</sup> Medical understanding of female anatomy was complicated by a number of social factors linked to physicians' (in)capacity to physically examine bodies, and in particular female bodies.<sup>26</sup> To survey medieval medical understanding of women's bodies is to examine a largely theoretical discipline, and a discipline that examines female anatomy in an attempt to explain its difference from male anatomy, without recourse to physical examination. Doctors and clerics were male, post-mortem examination was largely taboo, and female bodies were rarely examined by male doctors, largely because Church teaching prohibited, or at least discouraged, the practice. This was, in part, a result of the doctrine of resurrection. Dissections began to become more common around the year 1300, but it took time for these

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24 Victoria L. Bergvall, "Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Language and Gender," *Language in Society* 28.2 (1999): 277.

25 Nancy F. Partner, "No Sex. No Gender," *Speculum* 68.2 (1993): 419-44.

26 Walker Bynum 79.

practices to influence anatomical understanding.<sup>27</sup> As a result medical understanding of the female body was largely shaped by authority rather than by experiment or examination. And yet, despite the lack of physical examination of women in medical practice, poets wrote often of looking at women.

Contemporary gender theory has made obvious the potential for objectification in the case of the body. Bodies become 'objects' in Henryson's writing, in particular. The poetic objectification of women is parallel to the medical objectification of women.

Much of the anxiety about bodies and gender was rooted in anxiety about sexuality. Medieval literature is steeped with an eroticism that functions because sexuality was not spoken of plainly; the erotic was the art of speaking of sex obliquely. Jacquart and Thomasset examine this issue, with a focus on the relationship between the erotic imagination and reality. In their view erotic pleasure (as opposed to sexual pleasure) is linked to the imaginative possibilities of language. The poetic language of love constitutes a form of social code that enables discussion of sexual desire and activity. In this discussion, sexual practices will be an important source of evidence for techniques authors could use to speak of bodies of which they had no direct, lived experience (female bodies, for example). Dunbar, in particular, uses the coded voices of ladies speaking of sexual practice:

The games that ladies played and the techniques of love could be expressed through the ludic and erotic possibilities of language.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 5.

Anxiety about sexuality tended to come from the opposing forces of the capacity for pleasure in sex without reproduction on the one hand and Church pronouncements on the role of sex within marriage on the other. Jacquart and Thomasset note that “there is... a flagrant contradiction between the growing mass of prohibitions laid down by theologians, and the influx of information relating to contraception”.<sup>29</sup> Penitentials from the sixth to eleventh centuries associated contraception with magical practices and in the thirteenth century information about contraception was widely available. Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium* is just one of many texts available on this matter.<sup>30</sup> In the context of anxiety about sexuality and pleasure, Jacquart and Thomasset’s views on the role of courtly love will prove important to this analysis. They argue that “Courtly ideology... constituted one way of keeping the demands of reproduction at a distance”, that is, enjoying the erotic without the risk of pregnancy; a form of mental contraception. From their perspective this means that “intellectual life was for the first time associated with women’s demands”.<sup>31</sup> This argument is convincing, but contains some problems that I will examine in my own analyses of love poetry. They themselves note, for example, that the coding of love was about the way intellectuals and scholars spoke of love:

... a certain way of handling language and playing on words completely infiltrated the way these intellectuals discussed love. Everything in their language seems to conceal a trap and over and above the explicit meanings that we have elucidated were expresses in ambiguous words, the erotic fantasies of initiated

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, trans. A.L. Peck, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965-91).

<sup>31</sup> Jacquart and Thomasset 95.



scholars – great masters of quibbles and rhetorical figures – who cheerfully transgressed the boundaries of what was permitted.<sup>32</sup>

But these intellectuals and scholars were usually men. So while Jacquart and Thomasset might suggest that the language of courtly love was about women's desire, it was still primarily being used by male authors. This leads to interesting questions about authenticity of voice and the extent to which male authors can represent female sexuality and a women's experience of her body. I will consider this question in further depth in the later analyses.

### *Dangerous Sexuality*

Gender and health, both moral and physical, meet, for the medieval audience, in the domain of sexuality. As previously mentioned, sex was usually spoken of in coded terms, and this was primarily because it was a delicate subject, discussion of which was conditioned by moral opinion and tradition. It is no exaggeration to claim that sexual activity provoked fear amongst many in the medieval world, a fear that was encouraged by the church.<sup>33</sup> The lack of understanding of venereal disease only served to increase men's suspicion of women and of their mysterious sexuality. An examination of the physiology of sexuality as it was understood in the Middle Ages will prove useful to our analysis. First and foremost, one should note that medical discourse on women was essentially hostile. Medical discourse was not coded in the manner of love

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>33</sup> A discussion of the impact of Christian teaching on medieval attitudes to sex and the idea of male sexual superiority is available in Vern L. Bullough, "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity," *The Journal of Sex Research* 13.3 (1977): 185-196.

poetry, or at least not in any way intended to veil descriptions of anatomy behind metaphor. Women's bodies were not well understood and as we shall see, theories about their anatomy did little to generate sympathy. Public discourse was hostile to women, and this was supported by scientific and religious belief. As such, beliefs that women were dangerous were encouraged by the primary authoritative discourses.

The Galenic legacy for the medieval understanding of reproduction reinforced the view that women contributed matter while men contributed form. Medical theory associated heat with the male matter, and coldness with the female. This has become known as the doctrine of the two sperm. This doctrine led to debate about the extent to which women *consciously* contributed towards reproduction (for example, whether female orgasm was necessary for pregnancy to occur). This debate encapsulated the belief, which indeed won out, that female sexuality was simply reactive and not willed to the same degree as male sexuality. In literature this view is apparent in the figure of the lascivious female, a type explored by Chaucer in his characterization of the Wife of Bath and that shapes authorial views on many female characters in the poetry to be examined. For the male, reproduction and the sexual act were seen as conscious choices, physically evident in ejaculation. Ejaculation was, for the medieval doctor, an act of reason. On the other hand, women did not need to be rationally involved in the act of reproduction. Citing the view of William of Conches that women could enjoy rape because of the weakness of their flesh, Jacquart and Thomasset note the medieval view of:

...the irresponsibility of the woman. Her body lies outside her control; she is mere fertility. She may become pregnant without

experiencing orgasm, without any pleasure – practically without knowing it. She is thus the perfect antithesis of the male, who acts on this unconscious mechanism in a responsible and conscious way.<sup>34</sup>

From this perspective, one might assume that men, therefore, would be condemned for their irrationality had they made irresponsible sexual choices, while women would be condemned for their very nature had their own sexual practices proven immoral. To a degree we will find that this is the case and it is certainly true that much criticism of women focused on their fallen nature, rooted in the Fall in Eden, which in turn created a neat alignment between the theological understanding of women's nature and this medical-scientific analysis of their reproductive capacity. It will become apparent, however, that women were also criticised for lack of reason, despite scientific knowledge implying that such a criticism was rather unfair since their sexuality was not believed to be controlled by their reason. In addition, it was believed women not only provided matter for the creation of a child, but also that menstruation was a rejection by their bodies of impure matter that needed to be discarded. This impure matter was viewed with hostility and fear, and while some, such as Isidore of Seville, attempted some scientific analysis (he argued that menstruation was linked to the lunar cycle), there was also much written about the dangers of menstrual blood.<sup>35</sup> It was thought to produce rust, and to be a source of poisonous danger, particularly for men. As such women's bodies constituted something over which reason could only have a limited control, and moreover, which were in fact a

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<sup>34</sup> Jacquart and Thomasset 67.

<sup>35</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) bk. 11.

danger to men. Women's bodies were so dangerous, in fact, that the female body was thought to be capable of producing substances poisonous to men during an orgasm.<sup>36</sup>

### *Bodies, Attractiveness, and Ugliness*

Sexual activity is, of course, linked to attraction, and attractiveness is most commonly denoted in medieval poetry in formal descriptions of beauty. It is interesting for this analysis that descriptions of beauty differ depending on the gender of the subject. The discourses of male and female beauty sometimes overlap, but tend to praise fundamentally different qualities. Descriptions of ugliness also tend to be different depending on the gender of the subject. Jan Ziolkowski sketches the development of formal descriptions of beauty in medieval literature from twelfth-century treatises on poetics onwards, in order to consider poetic inversions of such descriptions. He argues for a recognizable tradition of ugliness descriptions: "an entire sub-class of late medieval English lyric poems that contain vituperative descriptions that invert the accepted catalogue of charms".<sup>37</sup> Ziolkowski traces the tradition from Hoccleve (on Lady Money) to Lydgate's *Fayr Lady so Fressh of Hewe*, through Dunbar's *Of Ane Blakmoir*, and on to Skelton, Shakespeare, and others. Ziolkowski identifies in Dunbar's poem the same jocular tone that is to be found in the larger tradition. Dunbar does not follow the regular head-to-foot order of body descriptions in *Of Ane Blakmoir*. His tone is also bawdy in this poem, to say the least. But even here

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<sup>36</sup> Jacquart and Thomasset 75.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Ziolkowski, "Avatars of Ugliness in Medieval Literature," *Modern Language Review* 79.1 (1984): 10.

Ziolkowski only affords Dunbar a single paragraph, and it seems that there is more to say about this poet's treatment of the body, and his place in the later medieval tradition. In Chaucer and Henryson strong themes will emerge of an association between external appearance and the character's internal moral value. These persist in Dunbar, but with some significant changes. As we shall see, like Henryson he follows the tradition of Marian devotion in praising her complete and perfect body. Like Henryson in particular, he uses physical corruption to signal moral corruption. But a new type of bodily value also emerges in Dunbar's poetry, with a shift towards a focus on the utility of the body. He moves towards a language that seems to emphasise value-judgements based not just on the individual's moral condition, but also on their usefulness and value (particularly as a sexual object): as a body that has worth, or is worthless to others. While in Henryson we find physical descriptions that signal value in terms of supposed moral absolutes, in Dunbar the body is assessed as an object of relative value. We also find, in the *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Women and the Wedo* in particular, unusual attention being paid to the bodies of men as they are valued by women. Ziolkowski identified Dunbar's use of the tradition of inverted descriptions of beauty. It seems that Dunbar also tries to invert existing relationships *between* bodies in his poetry. He also raises the spectre of a disjoint between physical appearance and reality – this is a departure from Henryson, and if anything, a return to some of the moral complexity of Chaucer's poetry. Sexual relationships are complex, at best, in all of the poets that we will examine, but Dunbar's attempt to speak of sexuality in a female voice is even more ambitious than Chaucer's female voices.

*Sexuality and Disease*

This discussion, and in particular the association between women and illness, leads us towards the second dichotomous relationship originally mentioned: illness and health. The moral approach to sexuality could not exist without the assumption that sexual activity will have consequences, both physical and moral, and that these stem from both physical and divine causes. Sexuality, gender and illness come together dramatically in the medieval imagination in the case of leprosy and venereal disease. Again, like so much medieval medical knowledge, understanding of these conditions is weakened by great uncertainty. Leprosy was often assumed to be a venereal disease.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand some believed women to be immune to the effects of leprosy (although they could carry it, and therefore constituted a silent, deadly risk). On the other hand women could be condemned in poetry (and specifically in Henryson's work) for their misbehaviour. Contracting leprosy was a symbolic punishment. The subtitle of Luke Demaitre's recent study of the disease, *A Malady of the Whole Body*, captures much of its threat as it was understood in the Middle Ages.<sup>39</sup> It was quite literally a disease of the 'whole' body, visibly fragmenting and weakening the body, although there was some disagreement about how to identify it and there were complications exacerbated by the fact that there were different symptoms for different people. It was also a disease of the 'whole' since it was so often associated with sexual behaviour (again most explicitly in Henryson). Carol Rawcliffe notes that when speaking of leprosy in the Middle

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38 For a discussion of leprosy and morality see Saul Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974).

39 Luke Demaitre. *Leprosy in Premodern Medicine: A Malady of the Whole Body* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007).

Ages one can avoid much confusion by acknowledging “...the ways in which medieval men and women responded to *what they believed to be* leprosy”.<sup>40</sup> According to Rawcliffe, modern readings of medieval leprosy and responses to it have been too heavily influence by the “arguments – and inventions – of nineteenth century leprologists” who viewed the disease through a moral lens. She argues that, in an attempt to bolster their own arguments for policies of exclusion in order to eradicate the disease, they pointed to supposed medieval reactions to the disease (including exclusion) to make their case. While Rawcliffe helps us to refocus our view on the actual medieval reaction to the disease rather than that communicated to us by the nineteenth-century moralists, in poetry leprosy was a useful symbolic punishment and an apt illustration of moral failings. This is something she also notes, and her work investigates the historical status of leprosy in the Middle Ages rather than its literary significance. Nineteenth-century moralists believed medieval reactions to the disease to have been so harsh precisely because of the reactions to leprosy evident in literature. The literary role of leprosy will be considered in greater depth in the later analysis of Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid*.

The case of leprosy is an obvious example of the relationship between health and morality in the medieval imagination. One of the most striking aspects of medieval medicine is the apparent duplicity of medieval scholars when it comes to ways of thinking:

...one and the same person could speak in different voices: a doctor of the church, for instance, when undertaking scientific research or

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40 Rawcliffe 2006, 5.

indulging in the extraordinary intellectual competition of commenting on a text by Aristotle, could come out with opinions that might cause problems for his theological thinking.<sup>41</sup>

This was also true of poets, and they shared much of the vocabulary of clerical writers. Like the clerical writers, they had the capacity to use vocabulary that is opaque and frequently difficult to interpret. This opacity of vocabulary was a consequence of the complex relationship between disease and morality. On the one hand some thinkers found evidence for disease in physical causes, and on the other hand others (or sometimes one and the same thinker) felt that misery though suffering was sent from God, either as a punishment or as a cleansing experience. This led to both condemnation and veneration of the sick. Hoccleve, amongst others focussed on “the theme of beautiful women deformed beyond recognition because of their vanity”.<sup>42</sup> As such it is difficult to treat medieval writers as if they were in one camp or the other, as by and large they were in both, and where they stood on the status of a character’s disease varied on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes their treatment of an individual character’s disease might vary according to the narrator’s mood within a poem. They themselves probably shared this perspective:

The idea of separating the two, of treating physical symptoms without addressing the spiritual malaise of the sufferer, would have seemed both profane and pointless.<sup>43</sup>

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41 Jacquot and Thomasset 3.

42 Rawcliffe 2006, 15.

43 Ibid 25.



*Punishment Embodied: Dante's Inferno*

Dante's *Inferno* provides excellent and influential example of the ways in which a medieval author could map medieval anxieties about the body and moral behaviour. *Inferno* is a catalogue of mis-shapen bodies, bodies that have been deformed to show the sin concerned in its physical form. Dante channels medieval anxieties about the body in descriptive accounts of the tortures waiting for the sinful, and his work is hugely influential for later writers. Some are tortured by external forces like demons, but others are physically deformed so that their own new form is their source of torment. These illustrate the mapping of social disorder onto the body in the medieval imagination. Dante's treatment of Mahomet provides perhaps the best example:

Già veggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla,  
 com' io vidi un, così non si pertugia,  
 rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla:  
 Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia;  
 la corata pareva e 'l tristo sacco  
 che merda fa di quel che si trangugia.  
 Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,  
 guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,  
 dicendo: 'Or vedi com' io mi dilacco!  
 vedi come storpiato è Mäometto!  
 Dinanzi a me sen va piangendo Alì,  
 fesso nel volto dal mento al ciuffetto.  
 E tutti li altri che tu vedi qui,

seminator di scandalo e di scisma  
 fuor vivi, e però son fessi così.  
 Un diavolo è qua dietro che n'accisma  
 sì crudelmente, al taglio de la spada  
 rimettendo ciascun di questa risma,  
 quand' avem volta la dolente strada;  
 però che le ferite son richiuse  
 prima ch'altri dinanzi li rivada. [*Inferno*, XXVIII, 22 – 42]<sup>44</sup>

This passage encapsulates many aspects of poetic anxiety about disorder and bodily dismemberment. Mahomet exemplifies discord and disorder for the medieval Christian, since he founded Islam, which was believed to threaten the survival of Christianity itself. The product of tension between Christianity and Islam was war, and the penalty for him and his followers is therefore appropriate; being constantly hewn asunder as would be his lot on the battlefield. But Mahomet's assumption that Dante himself belonged amongst the sowers of discord reflects the anxiety the poet must have felt since he himself was accused by his enemies of this crime. This passage exemplifies the dual nature of poetic anxiety about the body, since on the one hand the body is a matter for public concern, and on the other hand it is also a matter of the most private nature – a threat to the body is a threat of the most personal kind. It is worth bearing this in mind when considering the three major poets examined in

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44 "No cask ever gapes by loss of end-board or stave like him I saw who was ripped from the chin to the part that breaks wind; between the legs hung the entrails; the vitals appeared, with the foul sack that makes excrement of what is swallowed. While I was all absorbed in the sight of him he looked at me and with his hands laid open his breast, saying: 'See now how I split myself; see how Mahomet is mangled! Before me goes Ali in tears, his face cleft from chin to forelock; and all the others thou seest here were in life sowers of scandal and schism and therefore are thus cloven. There is a devil behind here that decks us out thus cruelly, putting each of this kind to the edge of the sword again when we have passed round the doleful road; for the wounds have closed again before any comes again in front of him,'" Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. John D. Sinclair, 3 vols., rev. ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1971).

this thesis. To speak of the body, even of the bodies of others, is to speak of a subject that cannot but bring with it feelings of empathy as well as feelings of anxiety about one's own person. While one might consider the demons in the above passage to constitute *res non naturales*, the images are still of an external agent punishing the sinner. In the analyses to follow in later chapters another type of physical disorder will occur, which in many ways is more disturbing, and that is a better analogue of illness as it tends to be experienced: physical disintegration without any visible external tormentor. All of the poets concerned depict characters whose bodies suffer without demons in the shadows cutting them up. Dante's description of physical disorder is both fantastic and didactic, since it describes what must happen to the sinner after death. In the cases examined in this thesis, it is less clear that there is a pedagogical intent. Rather they seem to express anxiety about physical disintegration that is not necessarily answered nor answerable by a clear moral code such as that which is evident in *Inferno*. Perversely, Dante's *exempla* can be construed as comforting, since in order to avoid such a punishment the audience could at least strive to avoid the behaviour that led to it. In the texts of Chaucer, Henryson and Dunbar such comfort is not so readily available since their poems do not necessarily clarify whether the character's illness is indeed a form of punishment. The potential for empathy is perhaps greater since the suffering described is experienced by characters in this life rather than the next. Whereas Dante's *Inferno* is causal, the analyses to follow may be considered as a (sometimes frustrated) search for causality. In reading the three poets examined in this thesis, we will frequently return to medieval anxieties about health and especially health as it intersects with issues of gender.

*Similarities Between Medieval and Modern Perspectives on the Body*

It will be important to acknowledge the influence of post-medieval and contemporary theories of the body on these readings of Chaucer, Henryson and Dunbar. Contemporary theory is a lens through which one cannot but see the medieval body. It is also noticeable that many of the issues that tend to arise in contemporary discussions of the body are present in medieval thought already:

Issues relating to the reliability and predictability of the body  
figured predominantly in the medieval imagination.<sup>45</sup>

*Embodiment* is a strong contemporary concern, and it was also a major concern in the Middle Ages. Cregan summarizes early twentieth-century approaches (or non-approaches) to the body, in particular those of Marx, Weber and Durkheim:

Overall we can say that embodiment as a grounding condition of  
social existence was, like other ontological categories such as time  
and space, implicit but unrecognised.<sup>46</sup>

The fundamental argument of this thesis is that for the three major poets here considered, embodiment is an explicitly recognised problem. It is a problem that each poet approaches in rather different ways. The embodied poet (or poetic subject) is most clearly evident in Dunbar's *Amang Thir Freiris, Within ane Cloister (Of the Passioun of Crist)*. In this poem the poet's piety is demonstrated through an affective connection with the suffering of Christ. Corinne Saunders notes that Merleau-Ponty's "characteristic mysticism chimes with medieval

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45 Philip A. Mellor, and Chris Shilling, *Reforming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity*, Theory, Culture and Soc. (London: Sage, 1997) 39.

46 Kate Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body: Mapping the Abstraction of Embodiment* (London: Sage, 2006) 2.

understandings of the body".<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to note that in twentieth-century analyses of the body, such as that of Merleau-Ponty,<sup>48</sup> the Enlightenment's separation of body and mind is criticised and a case is made for the medieval period in which the two were united in common thought. Michel Foucault, in particular, sees the medieval body in this way, and makes sense of physical punishment as a product of the association between mind and body in the medieval viewpoint. Foucault's most important contribution to modern approaches to the body, however, is the recognition that one is not just embodied in society, but that society also makes its mark upon the body itself:

But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but on the other hand, its constitution as a labour power is possible only if it caught up in a system of subjection... the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.<sup>49</sup>

Subsequent chapters will explore poetic descriptions of embodiment and of the relationship between bodies and social forces. Literary and sociological theories of the body, following the broader trend of theory in the last twenty years or so,

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<sup>47</sup> Corinne Saunders, "The Affective Body: Love, Virtue and Vision in English Medieval Literature," *The Body and the Arts*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Ulrika Maude and Jane Macnaughton (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 87.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995) 25-26.

have moved away from any single pseudo-objective view of the body and its place in social life, and instead have argued for an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of subjective perspectives on the body which are available to any of us at any time. Many critics have argued that the body does not have a reality for people (or a reality that concerns us) that is separate from its context in society and in an individual's life.<sup>50</sup> The body is inseparable from the life attached to it, from the people speaking about it, and from those hearing about it. Critics have drawn attention to the ways in which the body is socially constructed, and the ways in which it has always been so. Our understanding of the body does not function in isolation from our social experience – rather the body's meaning is created for us, and we interpret it, in our social context:

In sum, *the body has no intrinsic meaning*. Populations create their own meanings, and thus their own bodies; but how they create, and then change them, and why, reflects the social body. [my italics]<sup>51</sup>

Anthony Synnott's historical analysis of the body from a sociological perspective is relevant to the current discussion. Historically speaking, he argues, the body has no single 'meaning' – rather it has meant different things to different people at different times. Perspectives on the body very often have intrinsic value judgments associated with them, and in Synnott's analysis, they tend to be divided between ascetic beliefs (in which the body must be denied), influenced by the Romans for whom the body was corrupt, and by Origen for whom the body interfered with the soul's safety, and those who wished to glorify or indulge

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50 See Anthony Synnott, "Tomb, Temple, Machine and Self: The Social Construction of the Body," *British Journal of Sociology* 43:1 (1992): 79-110.

51 Synnott 79.

the body. For Plato the body was the tomb of the soul. His dualistic approach divided the physical from the spiritual and intellectual, and for Plato the body impeded the soul's perfection. Aristotle attempted to bring the two back together – regarding the body and soul as composing a unit that must be cared for in equal parts. Bodies have been worshipped and despised; the ancient Greeks may have had a cult of the body of sorts, but St. Augustine's praise of the “rhythm, poise, symmetry, and beauty” of the body was a defense against the self-mortification of early Christians such as Origen. These and many other perspectives contributed to a very mixed discourse of the body in the later Middle Ages. Each point of view did not take over from the next as such; rather, “another paradigm of the body joined previous paradigms and competed for legitimacy, with views rising and falling, merging and diverging, over the years”.<sup>52</sup> A criticism that has been made against analyses which focus on the socially constructed body is precisely that “the body dissolves into language”.<sup>53</sup> This can be frustrating if one's concern is the body in and of itself. For this study, however, it is precisely the point that the body dissolves into language in the writing of poets like Chaucer, Henryson and Dunbar. Later chapters will consider the implications of the body for the poet's language rather than the implications of language for physical bodies. The poets here examined inherited a tradition of very mixed feelings towards the body, a tradition shaped not just by Christian thinkers but also by the classical philosophers who had provided the core material for medieval natural philosophy. The *Canterbury Tales* are well known for their occasionally bawdy content and associated irreverence towards the

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52 Ibid 82.

53 Walker Bynum 1.

body, but can, when necessary, reflect rather different attitudes to the body, in the attitude of the Doctor of Physic, for example, or of the doctor in the *Tale of Melibee*. This diversity enriches the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole but also allows Chaucer to speak about the body in extremely diverse ways. As Synnott notes “the stories of Boccaccio in [the] *Decameron* and Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* show men and women thoroughly enjoying each other's bodies”.<sup>54</sup> Chaucer is not unique among medieval poets in his sometimes bawdy attitude to the body, nor in his occasionally much more clerical language. The question one might ask, however, is *why* Chaucer and others choose to use language that portrays such differing attitudes to the body.

### *The Body Literal, the Body Metaphorical*

There are some fundamental ideas that inform the readings to follow. Mary Douglas' emphasis on the body and social control has already been mentioned. In fact, much twentieth-century body theory has centred around this issue of social control. The contemporary body is highly politicized. One could be forgiven for thinking of human bodies primarily as loci in which politics are enacted. Readings of medieval literature that look to the body as a site of conflict are no doubt heavily influenced by twentieth- and twenty-first century thinking. Despite the current emphasis on the body as a political locus, one can argue that such tensions in the body are universal across geography and time. The types of tension that become evident will, of course, be different, but the relationship

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54 Synnott 79.



between social control and the body across societies can be asserted more or less uncontroversially. Bourdieu notes:

Every social order systematically takes advantage of the disposition of the body and language to function as depositories of deferred thoughts that can be triggered off at a distance in space and time by the simple effect of re-placing the body in an overall posture which *recalls* the associated thoughts and feelings... What is 'learned by the body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is.<sup>55</sup>

Bourdieu here communicates a rather dense set of ideas that deserve expansion. Language and body language are often thought of as means of communication which the individual can call upon to express ideas that have been predetermined in thought. This is certainly how a Cartesian might imagine the process to work: the mind, separate from the body, communicates *through the body* over which it has control. In this system verbal language and body language are consciously called upon to communicate well-crafted messages to an audience. In our day-to-day lives this audience is effectively the rest of the world. Bourdieu describes a more complicated relationship between language and meaning, one which is post-Cartesian, and yet also better reflects the pre-Cartesian relationship between mind and body. For Bourdieu, body-language and meaning are connected through lived experience. The language of the body is not simply a means of communicating thoughts and feelings, rather it forms an important part of the way in which thoughts and feelings are experienced.

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55 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990) 69.

Physical prostration is a good example of this. The act of kneeling before a superior is not simply a means of communicating one's obedience and inferiority; rather it is an enactment of one's social position. It is a learned behaviour that forms part of the experience of feeling inferior to another as well as a method of communicating that feeling. In physically placing oneself below another, one recalls the thoughts and feelings associated with prostration. Mental processes are not just deeply connected to physical behaviour – rather mental processes and physical behaviour are part of the same process of experiencing meaning.

This is strikingly close to the medieval understanding of the physical and mental worlds. In medieval art social relationships are frequently demonstrated through physical positioning. Physical hierarchies that we might think of as metaphorical are used extensively. For example, the very positioning of the human world below the heavens is both a metaphor for God's superiority and a description of the actual physical relationship between God and man. Margaret Miles describes this problem in terms of types of knowing, that is carnal knowing and cognitive knowing:

...Knowledge, experience and understanding in the medieval era were often corporeal products, that is, they belonged to people who experienced their minds and bodies as inextricably related.<sup>56</sup>

What are the implications of this for poetry? One might expect medieval writers to use physical description to describe relationships which we normally conceive of in political or metaphorical terms, and our readings of such relationships may

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56 Mellor and Schilling 22.

focus on the metaphor implicit in these relationships. It might be better, however, to remove the lens of metaphor and to consider that for the medieval poet the physical relationship and the socio-political relationship are one and the same, rather than being mediated through metaphor, as they might be in a modern text. Examples of physical relationships which can be both literal and metaphorical abound in medieval literature. A modern reader might find the metaphorical meaning in the poem and consider it separately from the literal meaning. This is analogous to the Cartesian mind-body dualism that has influenced the post-enlightenment world. Take the following short lyric, for example:

Heven, it es a riche ture.

Wele bies him that it may win!

Of mirthes ma than hert may think

And tha joys shall never blin.

Sinful man, bot thu thee mend

And forsak thin wikked sin,

Thu mon singe ay "wailaway!"

For comes thu never mare tharinne. [Nat. Lib Scotland, Advocates

18.8.1]<sup>57</sup>

This mid-fourteenth century lyric contains a central metaphor – that heaven is a rich tower, which the sinful man may not enter unless he mends his ways, and he will sing "wailaway!" for eternity should that fate of exclusion befall him. One

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57 Luria and Hoffman no. 180.

might expand upon it as follows – heaven is a hallowed special place that one cannot enter without repenting sin and living a good life, and the man who does not do so will have an eternity in hell to rue his choices. Is heaven *really* a tower? Does an eternity in hell *really* consist of singing “wailaway!”? Of course not; the lyric uses the image of the tower to show heaven’s elevation above us, and the singing of “wailaway!” symbolises anguish. It would be foolish to suggest that the lyric writer was not aware of the use of metaphor, and it would be pointless to suggest that the audience was not aware of the use of metaphor. However, such metaphors, with emphasis on physical relationships (for example the disparity in elevation and size between a mere man and a high tower) and physical enactments of feelings (such as singing “wailaway!”) are used throughout medieval lyrics and poetry, to the extent that one can think of much medieval poetry (particularly religious lyrics) as a series of metaphors based on physical relationships. Furthermore, while such positioning functioned metaphorically, it also accurately reflected the medieval understanding of the universe. Medieval cosmology functioned both literally and metaphorically because the structure of the universe reflected divine intention. One must consider then, whether the audience thought of these metaphors as we do, as a reflection of a spiritual or socio-political abstract reality, or whether the constant reinforcement of these images shaped their thought, so that the ‘real’ relationships that shaped their world were not metaphorically symbolised by these physical relationships, but rather *consisted of* these physical relationships.

Love-poetry, specifically the poetry of frustrated love, provides further examples of the physicality of medieval conceptions of mental states and relationships. Expansive descriptions of love-sickness are a common-place, and

the extent to which the lover acts out their love-sickness and the extent to which the experience of love-sickness is described in physical terms can seem alien to a modern reader. For the medieval audience, love is something that happens as much to the body as to the mind (and again this distinction is hardly appropriate – the experience is along a continuum between body and mind):

For hire love I carke and care,  
 For hire love I droupne and dare,  
 For hire love my blisse is bare,  
     And all ich waxe won;  
 For hire love in slep I slake,  
 For hire love all night ich wake,  
 For hire love mourning I make

More then eny mon. [Harley 2253]<sup>58</sup>

This lyric describes the behaviour caused by emotion, but the emotions are themselves experienced and enacted through the behaviour. Emotional longing is conceived of in physical terms, and emotions are evident through actions. A contemporary reader might think of this as an enactment of the ‘internal’ emotional world, but again in these lyrics it seems that this distinction is not made. The lyricist wears his heart on his sleeve. This is not to suggest that the medieval audience was blind to any separation of the emotional and physical worlds. The cares enacted in the lyric above are formulaic, and medieval lyricists enjoyed playing with the conventions as they were understood by the audience, as in the rather complex lyric below:

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58 Luria and Hoffman no. 33.

*Care away, away, away,*

*Murning away.*

*I am forsake,*

*Another is take,*

*No more murne ic may.*

I am sorry for her sake,

Ic may well ete and drinke;

Whanne ic slep ic may not wake,

So much on her ic thenke.

I am brout in suche a bale,

And brout in suche a pine,

Whanne ic rise up of my bed

Me liste well to dine.

I am brout in such a pine,

Ibrout in suche a bale,

Whanne ic have righte good wine

Me liste drinke non ale. [Caius Cambridge. 383.]<sup>59</sup>

This lyric can be interpreted in at least two different ways. On the one hand it can be read as a satire on the formulaics of love-sickness so common to medieval love-poetry. This lover, one might suggest, is not really in love at all, or at least

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59 Luria and Hoffmann no.41.

not in the deep physical sense that other poems describe. He is *so* in love (one might read sarcastically) that he can eat and drink well, and cannot drink ale because there is good wine available, rather than because his love stops him from doing so. It might be that he has accepted his loss now his beloved has taken another lover (*another is take*), and so has moved on from the enacting of love-sickness. This could, therefore, be a lyric marking the end of a period of love-sickness. Like love-sickness, this new period of relative health is bitter-sweet, almost as if the love-sickness was something to enjoy and this new health is less enjoyable. On the other hand the lyric could be read as a deconstruction of the expectations placed upon lovers by the formula of love-sickness. Here we have a lover who really *is* in love, perhaps, but who does not conform to the physical expectations placed on him. In either case, it is apparent that poets used a set of formulaic ways of thinking about the body, either to extend existing images of physical and emotional well-being or illness or to subvert them.

It should be apparent that how the audience perceives its world, and how the poet perceives and creates it in the text, are connected, but different, problems. Bourdieu's focus is on the lived experience of the individual, and this seems particularly appropriate for an audience experiencing a text. It also works rather well when we consider the poet's own lived experience, since he is also in the audience for literature. The question of how the poet creates this reality of physical experience in the text is different, however, since in poetry our perspective is directed by the poet. In the readings to follow it will be noticeable that each of the three poets makes distinct choices about what to show the audience of the body and of physical experience. From their choices one can

extrapolate something of their world-view, and in particular their view of the body itself.

### *Order and Disorder*

Contemporary theories of the body have emphasised particularly ideas of fragmentation and disorder. As discussed, Foucault sees the body as being politically invested, and disorder in the body can bring to the surface anxieties and tensions related to social disorder. The chapters to follow will focus on ideas of order and disorder in bodies because they relate strongly to the two dichotomies identified as central to this project – male/ female and healthy/ unhealthy. Contemporary critics have tried to construct systems of meaning in which order and disorder are identified, constructed and controlled in bodies and body-representation. Barbara Creed, for example, notes the threat that female bodies present to male audiences and authors.<sup>60</sup> An audience can see this in Henryson's work in particular, but it is an analysis that seems relevant to all the poets here considered. Arthur Frank looks at bodies in illness and identifies the anxieties surrounding illness as a "problem of control".<sup>61</sup> For Frank, our relationship with our bodies is located on a spectrum between predictability and contingency, and illness represents a drift towards contingency that we cannot control. Alongside this one might consider Elaine Scarry's analysis of pain. For

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60 Barbara Creed, "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts," *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, ed. E. Grosz and E. Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995) 112.

61 Arthur W. Frank, "For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review," *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, ed. M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B.S. Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1995) 51.



her pain is incommunicable – and this difficulty in communicating pain will also be evident in the texts that we consider:

Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.<sup>62</sup>

This contemporary focus on order and disorder is very useful in a medieval context and many critics of medieval literature have been informed by these theories. For them, the medieval preoccupation with the body displays an anxiety about disorder. For the minority of the population who chose a life of regimen, or for the many who aspired to it, there were “...aggressive, if structured flights into physicality that sought to harness the emotional and physical extremes characteristic of the medieval era to religious goals... Far from being caught up in a human culture of ideas and objects, medieval bodies maintained a sensual relationship with the sacred”.<sup>63</sup> For the Church, one could harness one’s body for the good; the right regimen could lead to religious experience. It is interesting to note that post-Cartesian attempts to re-imagine the role of the body in our lives, such as the *Leib* or lived body, have re-embraced the connection between lived experience and health:

It is becoming increasingly clear that our diseases are not just mechanical affairs, but a matter of how we live our lives and inhabit our world.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 4.

<sup>63</sup> Scarry 6.

<sup>64</sup> Drew Leder, “A Tale of Two Bodies: the Cartesian Corpse and the Lived Body,” *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, ed. Drew Leder (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992) 17.

For the purposes of this chapter, body experience can be categorized as coming in one of two forms. On the one hand the body can be experienced directly by the self. One's own body can be experienced through physical feeling and awareness. For example, one's own arousal is experienced directly through the feeling of arousal. One's own decay is experienced directly through the feeling of pain. This type of body-experience is closely aligned to that outlined by Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand the body is also (counter-intuitively) externalised through the senses. One can *perceive* one's own body or the body of another as an *object*. In Henryson's poetry sight is the most common sense in the perception of the bodies of others. There are some differences in the approaches the poets examined in this thesis take to describe their characters' perceptions of bodies. Henryson's poetry focuses almost exclusively on the second way in which bodies can be experienced, even when it comes to characters' perceptions of their own bodies. This is a significant development – Henryson is not the only poet to consider body perception but the level of significance that he gives to this particular aspect of the body in poetry is peculiar to him. For example, we will see in Chaucer that bodies are experienced by the self (that is, through physical feeling) as well as through the senses relatively frequently. In both cases the ways in which bodies are experienced and perceived are channelled to the audience through the perspective used in each poem. Consequently the ways in which the audience feels or sees the bodies of characters are dependent on authorial decisions.

*Seeing the Body: The Male Gaze*

Alongside a consideration of the phenomenological aspect of body-perception, male gaze theory is useful to this discussion. In terms of gaze, Henryson, in particular, makes distinct choices about how male and female bodies will be perceived in his work. As will be shown, the bodies perceived in Henryson are almost exclusively female, and when they are male, those bodies are, in a sense, feminized. As such, Laura Mulvey provides a helpful starting point for a consideration of the gaze in Henryson.<sup>65</sup> In a self-proclaimed “political use of psychoanalysis”, Mulvey outlines the concept of scopophilia (pleasure in looking), the notion of film as voyeurism, and the active/ male role of the perceiver as against the passive / female role of the perceived in twentieth-century cinema. Her essay has been highly influential. In considering the gaze a new perspective on Henryson becomes possible. This thesis will use Mulvey’s ideas as a starting point for consideration of a gaze which is very different in nature to the male gaze of, for example, twentieth-century cinema. The idea of the ‘double gaze’ is particularly useful:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1989).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid 19.

In the context of literature, an analogue to this is the shared gaze of the audience (equivalent to spectator) and the internal audience (the other characters in the story who perceive the object-body, equivalent to the internal characters in the cinematic story). This idea will be adopted with a modification of the 'erotic' sense of the gaze, since not all looking is the same. While Mulvey's ideas will form the basis for a reading of Henryson's poetry, it is A. C. Spearing's argument in *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur* that informs this interpretation of her ideas.<sup>67</sup> In a short chapter intended to initiate Spearing's own consideration of the 'look' in medieval love-poetry, he neatly summarizes much of the theory of looking, or the gaze, up to that point, but in doing so he problematizes the notion that the gaze is necessarily an act of power, and he draws attention to the important relationship between the look, perception, self-perception, and shame. Freud, he notes, had understood shame to be that (outward-looking) force that opposes scopophilia:

Thus, given the primacy of sight as the medium of perception, shame is the product of the sense of being seen, or rather the possibility of being seen...<sup>67</sup>

Shame, therefore, as opposed to guilt (which is inward-looking), is the sense that one has been, or may be, seen in some transgression. With Jean Paul Sartre our understanding of shame as it relates to acts of perception becomes more complex. For Sartre, shame is not necessarily the anxiety that one has been seen in transgression by another, but in fact, it is enough to recognize oneself in transgression to feel ashamed.<sup>68</sup> Spearing notes the recurrent connection

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<sup>67</sup> A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid 10.

<sup>68</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003) 1.

between shame and sight and, significantly, he shows that this is a trait of medieval shame as much as modern shame. He explores St. Augustine's explanation of shame, and the origins Augustine sees for shame in original sin. Spearing notes that acts of looking can be diverse in their intent:

...it seems to me that the watcher's look in male narratives cannot always be understood in terms of 'male gaze' theory... *Not all looking, even by men, is of the same kind...*<sup>69</sup>

For Spearing, this realisation leads to a new type of gaze. While for Mulvey, and others who theorise about the male gaze in cinema, the gaze is an active illustration of patriarchal power, Spearing notes that it can also be a gaze of longing. For Mulvey the gaze is a sign of male ownership of the female object; for Spearing it can signify *longing* (and therefore, lack of ownership, absence and frustration, particularly sexual frustration). The extension of the semantic possibilities of the gaze is important to this study, but in order for an analysis of the gaze to make sense with regard to Henryson, the potential meanings of the gaze must be extended further.<sup>70</sup> To categorize the gaze as one of either power or longing is not sufficient. There is a third category that for the moment will remain open, but that I would suggest is inhabited by a number of negative emotions: disgust or loss, or the more complex pity (which will be difficult to define as either negative or positive). This analysis of Henryson will explore the emotions associated with this third gaze.

A further important aspect of the 'male gaze', which Mulvey herself acknowledges, is that although it is categorized as male, its source may be a

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<sup>69</sup> Spearing 24.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Stanbury also problematises the male gaze in medieval literature. See Sarah Stanbury, "Regimes of the Visual in Premodern England: Gaze, Body, and Chaucer's Clerk's Tale," *New Literary History* 28.2 (1997): 261-89.

female audience or a mixed audience. This will be crucial in the analysis of Henryson, since we know that the audience internal to the text is both male and female (and if we follow the logic of Mulvey's argument, the other lepers in the *Testament of Cresseid* are also 'female', despite their gender, since they too are subject to the gaze of others). One can assume with some certainty that the contemporary audience of Henryson's poetry, and subsequent audiences, are made up of both men and women. Since this adjusted sense of the *gaze* is no longer one of power alone, but also of longing, disgust, pity and loss, we must consider the mixed-gender status of the two audiences (internal and external), since disgust may be a feeling of disgust at the damaged body of the other (the male gaze at the female) or of disgust at a damaged version of one's own body (the female gaze at the female). What all these gazes have in common, however, is that perception implies *assessment* of the other and *judgement* of the other. In each of Henryson's poems in which a body is gazed upon, he makes it impossible for the audience not to pass judgement of some sort, not to assume that the condition of the body is a product of the person. Gaze theory places important emphasis on the value ascribed to bodies in the act of perception and on the power relationships revealed by such ascription of value. In Dunbar's poetry, in particular, we will see that the body has a relative value. Fradenburg remarks on the great value of the King's body and the complex relationship of the poet's body to that of his subjects, for example, will be considered.

In the analyses to follow, questions will be asked about authorial intent, and this raises its own problems. A brief note on authorial intent may be necessary. Asking what each poet's authorial technique was with regard to the vocabulary of the body implies an intentionality on the poet's part that cannot be

ignored here. Burrow discusses the problem of 'alterity' in Middle English literature – whether as modern readers we can ever 'know' a medieval text, or whether we are hopelessly distant from it.<sup>71</sup> His conclusion is that one can try to know a medieval text but one must be careful:

My general conclusion can be easily stated, in an emasculated version of L.P. Hatley's opening *sententia*: 'The past is in some ways like a foreign country: they do some things differently there'. hence visitors to that country can take neither familiarity nor strangeness for granted.<sup>72</sup>

This approach may suffer the accusation that it searches for 'authorial intention', a search that is largely absent from the postmodern critical perspective. On the other hand, attempting to identify a poet's authorial *strategies* in speaking of the body may avoid this problem. The aim is not to identify the poet's own value judgments with regard to the problems his writing raises, but to see how he manipulates language in order that such problems may become apparent in the text. In fact, in the analyses to follow it seems likely that the poet's own value judgments are unknowable in part because they too are unstable. We cannot, as readers, be sure that the poet's attitude to the body will be consistent. Lee Patterson makes a strong case for the importance of discourse contemporary with Chaucer and against the prevailing late twentieth-century psychoanalytic approach to the Pardoner, arguing instead that the Pardoner is described within the "very specific symbolic discourse of medieval religious culture", as a figure suffering from despair. This is an instructive approach:

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<sup>71</sup> J. A. Burrow "'Alterity' and Middle English Literature." *Review of English Studies* 50.200 (1999): 483-492.

<sup>72</sup> Burrow 1999, 492.

One of the reasons we read literature is that it shows us different ways of being human in the world; one reason we continue to read books like the *Canterbury Tales*, from eras so distant from our own, is that they provide us with examples of living we find valuable. The rich psychological knowledge – gained both empirically in our lives and by demonstration in the books we read – must be protected from the various universalist models now on offer... That authorial intention can only be deduced from complex textual evidence does not mean that one may efface the author entirely. Not even to inquire what Chaucer might possibly be thought to have meant by the Pardoner's Prologue and Tale, *nor how a contemporary reader might plausibly have understood it*, is – to adapt Robert Frost's comment on writing free verse – like playing tennis with the net down. [my italics]<sup>73</sup>

The issue here, then, is not just what Chaucer's intentions were in choosing to borrow from one mode of discourse or another, but also what that mode of discourse meant to a contemporary audience. Chaucer's 'intentions' are of less relevance than the dynamic relationship between author, intermediary modes of discourse, text, and audience. Critical thought on sexualities in Chaucer has had to deal with issues of subjectivity as raised above. Gregory Goss argues against both negative twentieth-century readings of the Pardoner as a 'pervert' and later twentieth-century readings that try to reconstruct the Pardoner as a 'gay' character to whom Chaucer shows some sympathy – rather, Goss tries to

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73 Lee Patterson. "Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies," *Speculum* 76.3 (2001): 678-79.



contextualize the Pardoner within medieval discourses of truth. Goss's conclusions are also instructive, since he highlights the importance of realizing his own subjectivity:

As a gay man myself, and for anyone committed to anti-homophobic scholarship, I cannot decide which is more discouraging: to recognize the Pardoner within the medieval tradition as a figure of anti-social sodomite, pseudographer, or to see him misrepresented in the twentieth-century essentialist / medical tradition [and here Goss is referring to Walter Clyde Curry in particular] as a figure of the “pervert”.<sup>74</sup>

Bruce Smith also tackles sexuality – and comes up against similar problems:

It has now become axiomatic that sexuality, premodern or otherwise, is a function of ideology, a social construction that varies according to time and place. Different cultures at different moments in history construct sexuality differently. Hence the plural: premodern sexualities.<sup>75</sup>

Most pertinent to this discussion is an issue that historicist approaches to sexuality face – terminology:

If we are going to be strictly historical, how can we justify coming at the subject through *our* words (*heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, projection, repression, sexual dysfunction*) rather than *theirs* (*concupiscence, lust, whore, cuckold, sodomite, tribade*)?<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gregory W. Goss, “Trade Secrets: Chaucer, the Pardoner, the Critics,” *Modern Language Studies* 25.4 (1995): 31.

<sup>75</sup> Bruce R. Smith, “Premodern Sexualities,” *PMLA* 115.3 (2000): 320.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid* 321.

He cites, in particular, Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, saying she insists that “signifiers of the body are no less material in putting sex into discourse than the body being signified”.<sup>77</sup> This thesis will aim to use the poets’ own terminology, but it should also be acknowledged that this is not always possible.

This chapter has considered medieval and modern theoretical approaches to the body. In each case the body is a site of contested meaning. In the medieval concern for gender and for health, tensions are apparent that are played out in the language of poetic discourse. Modern body analyses inform the readings to follow, and these are useful because in many respects they mirror the fundamental concerns of medieval society. While there are great differences between modern and medieval society, the body is one of the subjects that connects the two spheres of discourse. The following chapter will consider Chaucer’s use of the language of the body and the ways in which he weaves together multiple discourses to explore medieval anxiety about bodies and to highlight apparent inconsistencies in the ways that medieval society constructed the relationship between people and their bodies.

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77 Ibid.

## Chapter 3: Chaucer, the Body and Truth

### *Chaucer's Varied Language of the Body*

This chapter will explore Chaucer's use of the language of the body. In the previous chapters it was noted that poets make use of scholarly discourse as well as borrowing elements of the various discourses of the body from other literary modes, for example romance. It was demonstrated that the language of the body on which a late medieval poet could draw was constituted of a mixed vocabulary informed by each mode of discourse. Chaucer's varied language choices provide a powerful example of the sheer variety of colourful and descriptive vocabulary and ways of speaking available. Both his narrators and characters speak of the body in ways that are learned, divine or profane, and sometimes their register will vary even within a single poem. In the previous chapters it was established that social and linguistic tensions about the body in medieval thought are evident in the very language used to speak of it. Chaucer's writing reveals his complex authorial strategy. His poetry highlights the different attitudes to the body in medieval society and occasionally lampoons the dominant discursive norms. The gap between scholarly and lay approaches to the body is evident in Chaucer's linguistic landscape. The disparity in register among his narrators and characters is vividly apparent. Later chapters will show that while Henryson and Dunbar also use different registers and sets of vocabulary to artistic effect, their language more often appears to demonstrate a consistent point of view that one might choose to

associate with the poet himself. The influence of Chaucer on Henryson and Dunbar, as well as their other influences, will also be discussed.

Because specific scholarly, religious and romance discourses had arisen in particular contexts, each mode of discourse was appropriate to particular contexts. The functional nature of each mode of discourse meant that they tended to be used in different contexts, and often by different types of person. It should be self-evident, for example, that medical discourse was most likely to be used by physicians or clerics. Chaucer was aware of the issue of linguistic propriety and evidence for this, specifically in his understanding of *termes*, will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Nevertheless he frequently creates situations where characters use modes of discourse that are inappropriate to them, or where characters misuse the language of a particular mode of discourse. This is the fundamental element of his authorial strategy. The disjunction created draws the audience's attention to the mode of discourse itself. For a poet interested in the role of language in social life, this is a useful technique because dominant modes of discourse can be rendered almost invisible by their omnipresence. Language used appropriately is likely to appear unremarkable to an audience, but it will frequently be noticed if it is used inappropriately. Chaucer forces his audience to become conscious of modes of discourse that normally hide beneath the cloak of their common usage. He also draws unusual connections between different modes of discourse by allowing some of his characters to slip between modes of discourse, and in the case of Alys of Bath, to comment overtly on the relationship between them. By reflecting on the nature of the language of the body Chaucer allows for examination of the body itself. Like the

language associated with it, the body can also go unexamined because of its ongoing presence, and therefore normality, in everyday life. This chapter will show, for example, that Chaucer sometimes uses the body to bring abstract ideas into the light of everyday life for examination but, simultaneously, the scholarly importance of unremarkable bodily features and functions is demonstrated by showing their connection to the philosophical debate of the day.

The frame of the *Canterbury Tales* provides rich opportunities for the poet to give texture to each teller, narrator or character through linguistic register. Chaucer's choices of mode of discourse are, by and large, appropriate to the tales' tellers, the poems' narrators and the characters themselves. Generally speaking his linguistic decisions would probably have met the expectations of a medieval audience, lending the voices in his poetry convincing realism. It is precisely because he pays so much attention to propriety that his occasional inappropriate choices are so striking. This chapter will consider, for example, the Wife of Bath. Is her language really appropriate to her or is her familiarity with scholarly language a poetic convenience necessary for Chaucer to discuss the relationship between scholarly knowledge and practical experience? The issue of how the voices of Chaucer's narrators should be interpreted is complex. Where wordplay exists, for example, can the audience judge this as a display of the supposed ingenuity of the fictional teller of the tale or are these moments in which the poet speaks directly to his audience, through the unconscious wordplay of his imaginary speakers?<sup>1</sup> Some critics have considered the unique characteristics of each speaker's language in the

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1 Neville Coghill, "Chaucer's Narrative Art," *Chaucer and the Chaucerians*, ed. D.S. Brewer (London: Nelson, 1966).

*Canterbury Tales*.<sup>2</sup> Others have considered the contrast between the frame, which tends to lend the tales authenticity, and the tales, which frequently deal in the world of the ideal.<sup>3</sup> Many have noted the linguistic depth of each teller but despite the detail of each tellers' characterization the poet himself is inevitably present in the text. The realistic voices of each character serves to suspend the audience's disbelief but also highlights the fictional nature of the work because the virtuosity of the poems' language brings the poet's skill to the fore. This problem is crucial in considering the propriety of Chaucer's language of the body. When is he concerned with audience belief and when is he concerned with linguistic play? The poems and tales examined in this chapter have been selected for the abundance of bodily language used by the poet. While many examples of the language of the body in Chaucer's writing will not be covered, the case-studies to follow will demonstrate Chaucer's linguistic dexterity and creativity. The poetry examined in this chapter illustrates the unusual ways that Chaucer calls on bodily discourse and instances in which audience expectations are undermined.

A discussion of Chaucer's range of terminology will demonstrate his complex relationship to the vocabulary of the body. Such terminology ranges from the *termes* of natural philosophy to bawdy language that might not, under normal circumstances, be considered terminology at all. Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner and the Summoner will then be considered in order to examine the

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2 William Elford Rogers, "Individualization of Language in the Canterbury Frame Story," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 15 (1974): 74-108.

3 Morton W. Bloomfield, "Authenticating Realism and the Realism of Chaucer," *Thought* 39 (1964): 335-58.

relationship between the language of the body and truth (or credulity).<sup>4</sup> The language of their tales also shows the poet's approach to complex medieval attitudes to sexuality. A consideration of Arcite's death in the *Knight's Tale* will show Chaucer's sophisticated understanding of the power of medical language in literature, rather than in scholarly discourse. It will again highlight the poet's interest in the truth-value of specific modes of discourse and will demonstrate his creative use of scholarly language to manipulate the emotions of the audience. A study of *The House of Fame* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* will again show the importance of issues of language and truth as they relate to bodily concerns. The chapter will then conclude with a reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This poem weaves together all of the issues of gender and health introduced in the previous chapters as well as demonstrating Chaucer's focus on the relationship between language and truth. Chaucer's treatment of Criseyde is well-known to scholars of Robert Henryson, because of its importance to Henryson's work. The following chapter will consider Henryson's approach to the language of the body and will investigate how he differs from Chaucer.

### *The Low and High Styles: Examples of Vulgarly and Eloquence*

A striking feature of Chaucer's language of the body is his versatility of register. His poetry ranges in its influences from the scholarly discourse of theology and natural philosophy to the bawdy language of medieval ballads and, one might

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4 Blamires addresses the issue of credulity and delusions of foresight. Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 77.

infer, everyday medieval life. *The Canterbury Tales* provides many examples of social interactions at their most vulgar. The vulgarity of such interactions stems from their breaking of social norms and social control. There is much evidence to suggest that medieval audiences enjoyed such language and found it very entertaining. The fart, for example, was a relatively common source of humour in the late Middle Ages. Barbara Bowen notes at least 32 lyrics that refer to farting between the 1340s and 1600 and she indicates that there are probably more to be discovered.<sup>5</sup> Such slapstick humour has, on the surface, no connection to the language of medicine and natural philosophy on which Chaucer draws elsewhere. It has the benefit, however, of being accessible to almost any audience. The fart in the *Miller's Tale* is one of the very best examples:

“Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art.”

This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart

As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,

That with the strook he was almost yblent;

And he was redy with his iren hoot,

And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoote. (I. 3805-10)

The mock heroic tone of these lines, in which Nicholas' fart is lent a strength more appropriate to the anger of a god, is juxtaposed with the bawdy language itself. This is funny even out of context. While bodily functions such as the fart are evident in some lyric poetry, they are normally avoided. The fart's appearance here is humorous because it is unexpected and because it belongs to a whole range of taboo

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5 Bowen 5.



bodily functions. In the discussion of medieval language in chapter one, the fart was noteworthy for its absence. The humour is in the audience's knowledge that such subjects are normally taboo and the enjoyment of the joke is in the breaking of this taboo. The existence of this taboo, however, is a product of social anxiety concerning bodily functions and body control as discussed in chapters one and two. The act of farting symbolises irregular body functions. For Nicholas to fart at Absolon is a terrible insult. Systems of body-control such as medicine and systems of social control such as *politesse* encourage the regulation of the body's functions and the fart represents the failure of such regulation. For a listener with a vested interest in maintaining social control over the body, such humour is disruptive.<sup>6</sup> Chaucer's tale demonstrates not just that the act of farting undermines social control, but that even the language of the action is taboo. The bodily function and the language used to describe it are connected in their disrespectability.

The fart's association with involuntary bodily functions renders it vulgar. Nevertheless it constitutes an act of communication with Absolon; a gesture of disdain. By farting on Absolon, Nicholas marks his territorial domain and signals his disrespect for him. Alcuin Blamires interprets Nicholas' actions as a victory of physicality over rationality. As discussed in the previous chapter, physicality was largely associated with feminine weakness, and so "Nicholas' arse-baring lowers

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<sup>6</sup> Both modern discomfort with the word *fart* and modern appreciation of the humour of both the word and the bodily function itself are apparent in a series of exchanges in the *BMJ* 2, No. 6182 (July 14, 1979), 120; 2, No. 6186 (Aug. 11, 1979), 394; and 2, No. 6189 (Sep. 1, 1979), 555. The first contributor suggests the use of the word *deflatulate* "in circumstances unsuitable to the monosyllabic alternative" and argues that Chaucer's use of the word shows that he could use it without embarrassment. A series of comments about the classical origins of the word, Latin alternatives, and suggestions for other viable English alternatives follows. At least some of these contributions appear to be tongue-in-cheek, and the exchange neatly illustrates our inheritance of both medieval anxiety about the word and the bodily function and the continuing tradition of undermining such anxiety with humour.

him to female animality".<sup>7</sup> This interpretation of Nicholas' actions appears to be supported by the order of events. Alisoun, after all, initiates the comic exchange by baring her own arse, and Nicholas follows suit. In following Alisoun he copies the female example. He goes further, however, and introduces the act of communication (the fart). This fart is a corrupted form of the male rational characteristic of action through communication. In this exchange it is apparent that Chaucer integrates bawdy humour with gendered discourse and a reflection on the status of male and female acts of communication. This bawdy joke subverts its apparently low intention and sheds light on scholarly concerns. One could argue, of course, that more elevated concerns are always implicit in bawdy literary exchanges since they can always, with relative ease, be read as metaphor. The bawdy style is very frequently associated with taboo bodily acts.<sup>8</sup> While the bawdy style may 'always-already' be associated with issues of discourse, however, Chaucer makes explicit this connection. This case is particularly interesting, however, because the fart appears to be deliberate and therefore its usage is a deliberate disruption of social regulation. It seems clear that Nicholas counters social expectations of his bodily control in order to insult (and in a sense assault) Absolon. Nicholas' disruption of social norms is met with actual violence. This raises the issue of language and truth. If Nicholas' fart signifies a method of communication designed to ridicule his love

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7 Blamires 55.

8 Vance notes that when Geoffrey of Vinsauf gives examples of the 'low style', "they are both centred in the infliction of bodily pain, and, more precisely, in stark gestures of sexual retribution and emasculation by a club-wielding peasant". The low style and the 'bodily' appear to be connected in medieval Rhetoric. Eugene Vance, "Chaucer's Pardoner: Relics, Discourse and Frames of Propriety," *New Literary History* 20.3 (1989): 730.

rival, Chaucer shows that victory is decided not through discourse but through violence.

Chaucer's treatment of the Summoner and the Pardoner in the *General Prologue* and their tales demonstrate an ongoing interest in the disruption of social body-norms and the connection between the bawdy style and scholarly and political discourse. The poet appropriates body discourse to his own ends. The discussion of the *Knight's Tale* later in this chapter will also highlight Chaucer's facility for manipulating discourse. Chaucer's double-meanings and shifts in mode of discourse could be interpreted as demonstrating his own multiple positions regarding social control of the body. As the earlier chapters demonstrate, contradictory attitudes to the body are characteristic of medieval thought. Anthony Synnott highlights the likelihood of disparate attitudes to the body even in the case of a single author:

At present, there is no consensus on the meaning of the body and, in a pluralistic society, no consensus can be expected. Constructions reflect not only the values of the culture, but also of the sub-culture, and of the specific individuals. The body means not only different things to different people, but it may also mean many things to the same person at different times or in different spheres. Thus the body may be spiritually a temple to the Christian, a friend as long as it is healthy, but as aging an enemy, physiologically a machine, astrologically cosmic, psychologically 'fun', or a corpse, and sociologically the self.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Synnott 105.

While one might argue that medieval society is not pluralistic, Chaucer's disparate approaches to it appear to demonstrate the opposite. Differing perspectives on the body are reflected not just among Chaucer's narrators and characters, but also in the language he chooses for them and in the modes of discourse that he appropriates. Chaucer's technique ensures that the body is not spoken of in one mode or another. Each discourse is undermined by juxtaposition with some other way of speaking of the body. In the *Miller's Tale* Chaucer uses bawdy discourse to explore more sophisticated scholarly issues. On the other hand he also refuses to allow an exploration of the social body to remain the territory of scholarly discourse. He consistently links the language of the body to both the scholarly and non-scholarly spheres, complicating the separation between the physicality associated with femininity and the rationality associated with masculinity.

### *Chaucer's Termes*

In shifting from one mode of discourse to another, Chaucer draws on different sets of vocabulary. In his own words, he uses different *termes* (*Troilus and Criseyde* II. 1038). By using *termes* that belong to a specific mode of discourse, Chaucer invokes the systems of thought associated with it. Chaucer calls on extra-textual discourses by using specialist terminology. J.D. Burnley has provided a definitive overview of Chaucer's *termes* and of attitudes to Chaucer's vocabulary in the following centuries. The Latin *terminus* was "used to signify a piece of natural

language severely limited in sense, and of non-figurative use".<sup>10</sup> In this chapter it will become apparent that Chaucer chose not to avoid the figurative use of *termes*. While Chaucer's understanding of *terme* may have been broader than that of his peers, even for him *terme* maintained "connotations of a restricted or defined usage":

*Termes* may be unfamiliar words, or quotations from a second language substituted in discourse, but they are most commonly utterances felt to be words or phrases characteristic of the usage of certain professional groups, social types or categories, or of particular areas of intellectual endeavour. The outstanding feature of most of Chaucer's uses of the word is this *sense of distinctness from the language of every day*. [my italics]<sup>11</sup>

The various ways of thinking about the body, indeed the various systems of bodily control, each had their own mode of discourse, and while they were integrated in medieval thought they also constituted separate and distinct ways of talking about the body. The use of the vocabulary of one specialist field or another signaled an individual's intellectual standpoint. Chaucer could therefore use *termes* not just as signifiers of the meaning of the word (or sign) itself, but also to signify the system of bodily control within the bounds of which he wished the speaker to operate. As a result Chaucer mixed everyday language, whether bawdy or simply casual, with more formal *termes* referring to the body in ways that implied a limited and controlled set of meanings. Poets frequently extend or change the meanings of

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<sup>10</sup> J. D. Burnley, "Chaucer's 'Termes,'" *The Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

words, but by employing *termes* that should have a strict and limited set of meanings in situations that stretch their semantic purpose, Chaucer not only challenges medieval linguistic norms, but also allows his characters to challenge the systems of thought associated with the relevant modes of discourse.

Chaucer employs the *termes* of natural science (*TC*, II.1038), alchemy (VII. 752), astrology (V. 1266), medicine (VI. 311), rhetoric and schools (IV. 16), and theology and law (I. 639; II. 1189). All of these together would be included “within the embracing reference of *termes of philosophie* (*HF* 857)”.<sup>12</sup> As a learned and well-informed observer of human behaviour, Chaucer also used *loves termes* and the vocabulary of different social strata, both of which have their own connotations, though perhaps without necessarily having the same “sense of distinctness from the language of everyday”, or at least from the everyday language of poetry. Indeed, according to medieval sign theory each sign only had one natural signifier,<sup>13</sup> and in this context *termes* should have had even more strict rules of usage than might be expected:

Logicians were interested in terms, utterances, and arguments, but medieval rhetoricians (and poets) also knew that, logical or not, utterances signify only in the context of their discourse (*sermo*).<sup>14</sup>

In Chaucer’s writing, however, the primary significance of the *terme* depends on the appropriate usage of words in different contexts. Chaucer aimed to use words that accurately described the subjects of his discussion, and their authenticity was

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (London: Duckworth, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Vance 1989, 726.

subject to the authority of the mode of discourse from which they were borrowed. Chaucer's sense of propriety seems to have been broader than that of most medieval scholars. It might be tempting to suppose that Chaucer's use of different *termes* is solely a matter of realistic character portrayal; it would make sense that his tales be inhabited by people who speak appropriately. This is often true but in fact Chaucer's characters sometimes use *termes* that sit uneasily with what might be considered their appropriate register: the Wife of Bath is a good example of this and her language will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. Burnley notes that "Chaucer's use of the word *termes* coincides closely with more modern ideas of register and collocation".<sup>15</sup> Chaucer's language of the body is not disciplined in its linguistic register and it seems that Burnley's qualification of Chaucer's use of *termes* is an apology of sorts for his sometimes *inappropriate* use of *termes* (if *termes* are only to be used according to the strict limitations of their originary mode of discourse). This analysis will show that Chaucer's inappropriate use of *termes* is deliberate rather than a sign of disregard for propriety in the use of terminology. It draws attention to the potential for fallibility in the systems of thought that produced discourses of the body and it is a significant attempt to challenge the audience to reflect upon existing systems of bodily control. Furthermore it highlights the fact that alternative non-mainstream perspectives existed, even if only in Chaucer's imagined discursive space.

Whether or not Chaucer was attempting to launch an outright challenge on the legitimacy of these systems of thought must remain open and, in fact, it seems

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15 Burnley 56.

unlikely that this was the case. It seems more likely that he was aware of this technique's potential to create challenging and stimulating poetry and to give depth to characters that would force the audience to reconsider its acceptance of social norms. Christopher Cannon warns against over-emphasizing Chaucer's importance as a creator of new words. To his readers in later centuries, "Chaucer became the lightning rod of both praise and opprobrium" for his apparent linguistic innovation. In the eyes of some he became the "exemplar par excellence of early attempts to augment English with *termes* borrowed from Latin and French".<sup>16</sup> As Cannon points out, English was already full of words that had been imported from Latin and French. To credit Chaucer with their borrowing is an exaggeration encouraged by centuries of criticism that portrayed him as the father of English literature. There is often insubstantial evidence to credit Chaucer for the introduction of many of the words regularly attributed to him. On the other hand, even if Chaucer was not the first to use these *termes* in English, they were still probably more closely associated, for his audience, with their French and Latin origins than with any near-contemporary English work in which they occurred. Cannon notes that even in the *Middle English Dictionary*, Chaucer's linguistic use is still privileged, precisely because he tends to be thought of as a linguistic innovator.<sup>17</sup> One of the reasons his usage is privileged in this way is its imitation by later writers such as Hoccleve and Lydgate. The other poets examined in this thesis also learned how to speak about

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Cannon, "The Myth of Origin and the Making of Chaucer's English," *Speculum* 71.3 (1996): 659.

<sup>17</sup> Cannon 667.



the body from Chaucer, and this will be taken into consideration in the analyses of their poetry in the following chapters.

*Language and Truth: the Summoner and the Pardoner*

By using expert terminology, Chaucer's characters and narrators implicitly make a claim for the truth of their own pronouncements. In the case of two of his tale-tellers, the reliability of the word is called into question. This creates an interesting space for Chaucer to explore the impact of language on social views of the body and on the different truths associated with it. Both the Summoner and the Pardoner make reference to the reliability of the word. The Summoner offers to qualify his statement "in a maner glose" (III. 1920) while the Pardoner knows the power of a sprinkling of Latin words in his sermon "to saffron with my predicacioun,/ and for to stire hem to devocioun" (VI. 345-46). In both their tales there is an association between the degeneration of the relationship between language and truth, and the degeneration of the physical body. If authoritative discourses make claims to linguistic truth, then their own ways of understanding the nature of the human body and their approaches to its control are also true. Neither the Pardoner nor the Summoner, however, seems conscious of the philosophical implications of the language of the body and the relationship between language and body that their *termes* illustrate. Rather their learning seems incomplete and they appear to use their clerical knowledge for decidedly selfish ends. Where they use the *termes* of the cleric they do so in order to further their own ends, not to elucidate a

higher truth. This illustrates the sophisticated levels of discourse trickery in which Chaucer engages. His tellers use terms inappropriately in a fashion that is not necessarily meaningful to them, but that signals the author's perspective on their character to the audience. In using the language of the body in a manner that causes distrust, they call into question the absolute truth-value of the modes of discourse that they employ.

The Pardoner's words taken alone might suggest that Chaucer was leaving the audience to come to its own conclusions about this character's authenticity as a man of learning. The Host, however, voices the concerns that an audience might feel. In *The Pardoner's Tale* the Host serves as a channel for the reaction of an audience, or perhaps of the poet himself, to the Pardoner's duplicity. Following the Pardoner's suggestion that he unbuckle his *purs*, a suggestion that the Host takes to be sexual, he is met with an angry response:

...Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech,

And swere it were a relyk of a seint...

.....

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond

In stide of relikes or of seintarie.

Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;

They shul be shryned in an hogges toord! (VI. 947-8, 952-5)

The Host disbelieves the authenticity of the Pardoner's relics (hardly an unreasonable disbelief). Alongside his disbelief of the Pardoner's religious motivations is a suspicion of his authenticity even as a man, whether one interprets

this as a problem of sexuality or of gender. The Host threatens to remove the Pardoner's *coillons* (testicles) and thus, through physical violence, to make real the femininity (if an absence of male sex organs is here to be interpreted as femininity) of which the Pardoner is accused. It is unclear whether the Host has greater distrust for the Pardoner as a man or as a cleric. In either case the Pardoner is not what he seems. In fact it seems clear that the Host's distrust is for both, and in a sense the two modes of distrust are inseparable. The Host's distrust in the Pardoner, a distrust that perhaps will be shared by Chaucer's audience, stems both from the things he says and from his physical appearance. The Pardoner has an appearance that many readers have taken to be effeminate. The terms in which he is described are certainly not those of a strong virile male character such as the Knight. He has smooth yellow hair that hangs over his shoulders (I. 675-8). The description seems to echo the formulaic description of a beautiful lady in romance poetry. In the context of this tale it is inappropriate and even corrupt. His description is also qualified by a denigration of the beauty that it initially appears to suggest:

But thynne it lay, by colpons oon and oon (I. 679)

His hair at first appears beautiful, but in fact lies thin and unattractive. The question of propriety in the use of *termes* was introduced earlier in this chapter. Here is a physical description that shows Chaucer making ample use of inappropriate language and, furthermore, inappropriate bearing and appearance in a character. The poet does this to create an individual who makes the audience, the narrator, and some of the other characters uncomfortable. Not only is the Pardoner's visual appearance described in terms usually reserved for women, but also he himself

seems unaware of his inappropriate appearance, thus redoubling the insult to an observer concerned for propriety. He does not wear his hood “for jolitee” (l. 680) and he is unperturbed by his own appearance and unashamed of his own difference. The Pardoner’s body represents a site of categorical anxiety for the audience. He is a man and yet he appears in some ways to be like a woman. The language of the body in his description renders him grotesque. As mentioned, the Host later reacts with a threat of violence and with anger. This seems a response appropriate to his character because the Host’s masculinity is better aligned with medieval expectations than that of the Pardoner. Also, as Host, he might be considered to have a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo. If the Host represents a point of view that would be shared by a medieval audience then his reaction indicates the poet’s expectation of its emotional investment in social norms.

The narrator’s characterization of the Pardoner is interesting because it also shows symptoms of discomfort, but for different reasons. The narrator’s task in the *General Prologue* is one of description and categorization. The *General Prologue* is, after all, a categorized list of the tellers of the *Tales* themselves. The narrator displays his own anxiety about categorization. In calling him the Pardoner he categorizes him according to his profession, but a note of uncertainty enters when the narrator attempts to categorize him according to his gendered status:

I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (l. 691)

This line is usually glossed as a metaphor for the Pardoner’s status either as eunuch or a homosexual, and critical readings have tended to understand him as either one or the other. In the previous chapter I noted Gregory Goss’s account of his personal

struggle to come to terms with his own discomfort in accepting medieval readings of the Pardoner as a sodomite, early twentieth-century readings of the Pardoner as a pervert or a eunuch, or even later readings of the Pardoner as a homosexual. Each of these positions is informed by the sexual politics of its time, and Bruce Smith's wariness of approaching the status of the Pardoner through modern terminology of sexuality has also been noted. The portrayal of a presumed celibate cleric as a *geldyng* further complicates matters. This might be true in a metaphorical sense (since celibacy might be seen as a form of self-castration) and yet in suggesting the ambiguous nature of the Pardoner the narrator raises uncomfortable questions concerning medieval understandings of masculinity as applied to celibate clerics. The status of the Pardoner cannot be resolved: the open nature of the description, "a geldyng or a mare", disallows such clean categorization. The critical failure to agree as to his true nature is a product of the way he is described. The poet highlights the possibility for anxiety about the body by creating a peculiar and troubling character. The *gelding or mare* metaphor is animalistic, furthermore, and this indicates that in his ambiguity he might even be considered inhuman. As Goss and Smith show, it seems preferable to note the range of meanings created by his difference, and the discomfort that this creates, rather than becoming trapped by that discomfort. What can be said of the Pardoner is that he is not a man of action like the Knight, but rather is associated with flattery, seduction and trickery of the poor.

The use of language rather than physical force is normally a feminine characteristic and this is certainly the Pardoner's *modus operandi*. Surely this must raise difficult questions. Does the Pardoner's deceptive language somehow implicate

the poet (for whom language is a fundamental tool) in this realm of the feminine? As noted in the previous chapter, the physical is associated with the feminine (while the rational is associated with the male), and one can see even in the way the Pardoner's use of language is described that body parts (specifically the tongue) play a strong role. In the following passage, the description of the Pardoner's preaching has a disturbingly sensuous quality:

Wel koude he rede a lessoun or a storie,  
 But alderbest he song an offertorie;  
 For wel he wiste, whan that song was songe,  
 He moste preche and wel affile his tonge  
 To wynne silver, as he ful wel koude;  
 Therefore he song the muriely and loude. (VI. 709-14)

The skilful and cynical use of language is the Pardoner's defining characteristic. He has mastered the affective quality of language, but he does so in order to make money rather than to communicate the Christian message. The Pardoner's singing tongue is astonishingly honest about the ways in which he uses language and deceit to gain what he wants:

“By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer,  
 An hundred mark sith I was pardoner.  
 I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet,  
 And whan the lewed peple is doun yset,  
 I preche so as ye han herd bifoore  
 And telle an hundred false japes moore...

... Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne

That it is joye to se my bisynesse..." (VI. 389-99)

The *Pardoner's Tale* and, as will be shown, the *Summoner's Tale* share a fundamental irony: the speaker may not live a good life, but nevertheless his teaching reflects orthodoxy. The Pardoner teaches that "*radix malorum est Cupiditas*" [greed is the root of all evils] (VI. 334). The Pardoner's speech, however, is learned "by rote"; it is not based on real understanding of scripture. For the Pardoner, then, these words and the word of gospel are tools to be used as needed rather than important teachings to be analyzed and interpreted. Because these teachings and *termes* are learned by rote without being internalized, the Pardoner's words betray his true nature. Because he does not fully understand (or care about) the teachings that he uses he inadvertently condemns himself in the eyes of the Host and, in turn, the audience. Just as his physical appearance leads to uncertainty about the truth of his intentions, so too the teachings he repeats condemn him. As noted in the previous chapter, Lee Patterson sees the Pardoner as a figure of despair. The question of whether the Pardoner is aware of the ironies inherent in his duplicity may be answered in this approach. He is a fallen figure, and in becoming an enthusiastic cynic and liar, he embraces this fallen nature. His hostility towards the Host is a further symptom of his acceptance of his nature and it strikes a defiant note. On one level he is betrayed by his own appearance and words, on another level he is aware of what he is. This challenges both the Host and, ultimately, the audience to condemn him for it.

The Pardoner's duplicitous nature raises questions about the authenticity of the relics that he sells. If the Pardoner himself is not to be trusted then one might ask how these body parts can be seen as real relics of holy figures. This raises uncomfortable questions for Chaucer's audience about the authenticity of relics in general and about the relationship between the body parts of holy figures and their redemptive qualities. The Pardoner trades authoritative discourse just as easily as he trades supposedly authentic relics. In the *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale* there is an association between Latin *termes* and relics, bones and other mysterious objects of veneration.<sup>18</sup> He makes relics of Latin phrases, and sells them along with supposed physical relics. Again Chaucer highlights the connection between language and body. The phonetic similarity between "latyn" and "latoun" is no coincidence in the passage below:

...in Latyn I speke a wordes few,  
 To saffron with my predicacioun,  
 And for to stire hem to devocioun.  
 Thanne shewe I forth my longe cristal stones,  
 Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones -  
 Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon.  
 Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon  
 Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep. (VI. 344-51)

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18 For an interesting discussion of the medieval interest in body-part reliquaries and the significance of relics see Caroline Walker Bynum and Paula Gerson, "Material Continuity, Personal Survival, and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts," *History of Religions* 30.1 (1990): 51-85.



*Latoun* was known for its gold-like appearance. It is a deceptive metal – not the real thing. These relics, one may assume from the Pardoner's general behaviour, are also fakes, as are his Latin words, learned by rote and spouted off without any real significance to the occasion. The potential for Latin terms to be untruths cloaked in their learned appearance is highlighted in the phonetic similarity of these two words. Their frequency in everyday life means an audience might not normally question their authenticity. The Pardoner compares his own preaching to that of a dove nodding: frequently in Chaucer's writings meaningless chatter and suspicious speech are compared to the behaviour of birds, for example in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Walker Bynum and Gerson note the emergence of body-part reliquaries in the West in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and furthermore they point out that the shape of the reliquaries was not necessarily that of their contents. For example, a reliquary in the shape of a foot might contain some other part of a saint's body. The significance of the reliquary, they argue, was ritual rather than imitative. Their study raises two general questions, "the issue of likeness, and the issue of response":

What is the relationship of inside and outside in these objects and in reliquaries in general? If the container resembles or represents or reveals its contents, the relationship may be mimesis. But what then is the purpose of mimesis?... Historians such as Robert Javelet and Karl Morrison have informed us that exactly the period that saw the emergence of body-part reliquaries produced, as well, an intense exploration of the issue of likeness in spirituality, predicated on the assumption that spiritual progress was possible because human

beings were created in the “image” of God... Moreover, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also saw, in theology, in political theory, and in canon law, sophisticated discussion of how one man could “represent” or “stand for many”... it seems probable that consideration of issues of “likeness” in texts on the one hand and in objects on the other will prove mutually illuminating.<sup>19</sup>

*The Pardoner's Tale* deliberately juxtaposes the functionality of relics and the issues of likeness associated with them with the Pardoner's doctrinally accurate, but personally insincere, preaching. *His* body seems unmimetic, yet that which he metaphorically holds (the Word of God) is communicated by him in an undamaged form despite his own cynical commercial attitude to it. Through the language of the body, then, Chaucer raises questions about the power of authoritative discourse in general. Does power reside within the *termes* themselves or does the nature of the speaker delivering those *termes* have an effect on their authenticity? For Chaucer, who deals in *termes* and who plays language-games with authoritative discourse regularly, this is a very important question. If he, as a poet, uses authoritative discourses, is he bound to follow the restricted limitations of the *termes* in order to maintain their true power? Or, like relics, do these *termes* have some essential nature that even he, as a poet who may (like the Pardoner) not be worthy of the goods he carries, cannot corrupt? The issue also highlights Chaucer's approach to the issue of coherence, consistency and linguistic propriety. Should the speakers to whom he gives authoritative discourse not be fitting to it then, like the Pardoner,

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19 Walker Bynum and Gerson 55.

that which they peddle may not be taken seriously by an audience because its authenticity will fall into doubt. The Pardoner's attack on gluttony, the "cause first of oure confusioun", is a good example of this issue of coherence. The Pardoner associates gluttony with drunkenness, excess and immoderate behaviour. The mouth's normal function is inverted: "Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede/ That of his throte he maketh his pryvee/ Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee" (VI. 526-28). This is especially significant because the Pardoner refers not only to that which is taken into the body, but also that which is expelled from the body:

O wombe! O bely! O stynkyng cod,

Fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun!

At either ende of thee foul is the soun. (VI. 534-46)

Without doubt this refers to belching more than to speaking, but it is immediately followed by a reference to philosophical debate. The Pardoner condemns the turning of "substaunce into accident" to feed the belly (VI. 539). Drunkenness is condemned for stealing man of his "discrecioun": it unlocks the tongue (VI. 559). The rational act of speaking is associated here with the animal act of belching. This turn towards the word would seem to indicate that the *foul ende* referred to above may also be intended as a reference to speech. This reflects the holistic attitude to body and mind (as discussed in the previous chapter), in that man's physical behaviour will have an effect not just on his bodily functions but also on his speech, a faculty normally associated with reason.

The passage again undermines the primacy normally given to rational thought since behaviours such as gluttony can so easily affect its product (speech).

The Pardoner is a feminized man. Since his preaching seems in many ways to be a catalogue of his own failures this might be read as a description of gluttony as a feminizing behaviour. Such behaviour leads men to loss of control over the rational faculty of speech (and lowers them to the status of women, as Blamires saw in Nicholas's behaviour). Physical habits are again linked to language and speech in the Pardoner's next condemnation, that of "hasardrye" or gambling. Again it is seen as a behaviour defined by immoderation, by loose words, by cursing, and by blasphemy. A focus on language is evident in the other condemnations of cursing and taking the Lord's name in vain. The oaths that the Pardoner gives as examples are on Christ's body:

"By Goddes precious herte," and "By his nayles,"

And "By the blood of Christ that is in Hayles,

Sevene is my chaunce, and thyn is cynk and treye!"

"By Goddes armes, if thou falsly pleye,

This daggere shul thurghout thyn herte go!"- (VI. 651-55)

The Pardoner's own body is untrustworthy, but the body of Christ is infallible. It is an absolute referent: as close to pre-lapsarian language as a sinner can approach. The Pardoner's story of the gamblers who chase death is coloured by their swearing, and this swearing is usually on the divine body: "Cristes blessed body they torente" (*PT*, 709). But like the Pardoner their oaths on the sacred body do not reflect any intention to behave well. Once again it is deception that leads to their downfall and this deception is brought on by greed for gold. The safety of the body and monetary greed come into conflict and the agent of destruction is the word. The ultimate irony

is that despite the moral of this tale, the Pardoner, himself a deceiver, goes on to offer his words and his absolution in return for a new cleanliness. The Host responds to the Pardoner's mocking with hostility. Despite the verbal focus of the *Pardoner's Tale* their disagreement cannot ultimately be resolved through debate. As in the *Miller's Tale* authority is ultimately vested in physical force, not language. Physicality may be associated with the feminine and reason with the masculine, and yet in this context speech is shown to be ultimately flawed. It is the Knight, a symbol of reason but also of male physical action, who brings about resolution when he asks them to kiss one another and make peace (VI. 964-8). Chaucer complicates medieval associations of gender and physicality and also challenges the primacy of the word as authority. Of course it is the word of the Knight that ultimately has authority here but it is only through the physical kiss, that is through body-contact, that the disagreement can be brought to a close. If the Pardoner represents duplicity, it seems that the Knight represents a more simple world in which all problems can be resolved through physical means, whether that be a kiss of peace or violent action.

The Summoner shares with the Pardoner a nature that seems to be betrayed by its physical characteristics and a flawed grasp of authoritative discourse. While anxiety about the body of the Pardoner is triggered by issues of gender, the anxiety the Summoner inspires in an audience is linked to health, and moreover to the connection between health and morality described in earlier chapters. The Pardoner's language betrays a duplicitous nature, yet he seems to use authoritative discourse despite its potential for application to his own behaviour. The Summoner's use of language is also cynical, and the Latin phrases he scarcely

remembers are used inappropriately, either in drunken confusion or as formulae, the power of which resides in their authority and origin rather than their meaning. Just as uncertainty about the Pardoner's gender has led to differing critical views of the significance of his physical appearance as described in the *General Prologue*, so the Summoner's physical appearance has led to much debate. Critics have disagreed as to the specific cause of his disfigurement. The Summoner's skin-condition makes him ugly enough to frighten children (I. 628). Some have argued that his condition is caused by leprosy, others by syphilis, or perhaps even scabies. Whatever the cause of his appearance, the association in medieval thought between outward appearance and moral character is clear. We are told of the various remedies, "garleek, oynons, and eek lekes, / and for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood" (I. 634), which the Summoner takes to cure his illness. The significance of the leek as a cure for drunkenness was noted in chapter one. But either as a result of these remedies, or perhaps despite them, the Summoner's character is apparent in his speech as well as in his appearance. He is unable to hold his tongue, which results in his babbling the few Latin terms he knows without any rational order:

Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood.

And whan that he wel dronken hadde the wyn,

Thanne wolde he speke no word but Latyn. (I. 636-38)

He knows "a few termes... That he had lerned out of some decree" (I. 639-40) and the narrator compares him to a jay who can repeat phrases as well as the Pope (I. 642-3). This echoes the comparison of the Pardoner to a dove nodding. Unlike the

Pardoner, the Summoner seems sexually aggressive, but like the Pardoner he too knows how to swindle people when necessary (l. 652).

If the Summoner's appearance is symptomatic of imbalanced humours, then his imbalanced speech is another sign of his condition. Physical well-being and semantic stability are implicitly linked. A few lines later we are again reminded of the relationship between body and language. The power of language over the body and over the soul, is apparent in the specific instance of excommunication, the "ercedekenes curs" (l. 655). The Summoner is less concerned by this possibility than the narrator:

But wel I woot he lyed right in dede;  
Of cursyng oghte ech gilty man him drede,  
For curs wol slee right as assoillyng savith,  
And also war hym of a *Significavit*. (l. 659-62)

It is significant that both threats here, of excommunication and imprisonment, are described in terms of the spoken (or rather written) word, a "curs" and a "*Significavit*". The narrator, however, has a different attitude to language and authority, and so communicates anxiety about these even if the Summoner does not.<sup>20</sup> This is another instance in which the narrator's anxiety might be expected to mirror that of the audience. Excommunication was to be feared primarily because of its effect on the everlasting soul, but it seems likely that its consequences on earth were also to be avoided. These might include social exclusion, poverty and misery.

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<sup>20</sup> Vance 1989, 731. Vance discusses the power of a text bearing Papal authority over the illiterate poor: "Far from communicating nothing, these texts enforce an illusion of truth-value in the Pardoner's ensuing discourse."

In the *Summoner's Tale* language is consistently associated with such immediate threats to physical well-being, as well as with the possibility of improving physical well-being. Language and body are connected to commercial transaction. Meaning and being are associated with monetary value throughout the *Summoner's Tale* and the *Pardoner's Tale*. By refusing to insulate language from the same risks that threaten the body, Chaucer again narrows the gap between the abstract and the physical. Language and the tongue, in particular, have a close association, as we have seen.

In the *Summoner's Tale* bodies sicken rather than flourish; words deceive and threaten rather than clarify. In this tale a *cherl* gets the better of a cynical Friar who is not unlike the Pardoner. The Friar uses his spoken words, his *qui cum patre*, cynically to nourish his body. Worse still, not only has he made forgiveness an overt transaction, but also he makes a crooked one of it at that, planing "away the names evrichon/ That he biforn had writen in his tables;/ he served hem with nyfles and with fables" (III. 1758-60). This planing is an act of erasure. If words are lent a permanence of sorts by the authority of scripture and the church, the removal of names undermines the permanence of the word and subsequently of authority. The Friar sees his own teachings as a gloss of sorts. Despite his *Deus hic!* he has little respect for the letter of the Gospel:

I have to day been at youre chirche at messe,  
And seyde a sermon after my symple wit -  
Nat al after the text of hooly writ,  
for it is hard to yow, as I suppose,



And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose.

Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,

For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn. (III. 1788-94)

Letters may slay, but as the audience has seen it is he who slays letters in his planing away of names from tables. His gloss is one of erasure rather than one of addition or clarification. Again, the relationship of language to the realm of the physical is highlighted, although in this case it is represented in wax rather than on the body of the speaker. But the Friar is also dependent on language for bodily well-being. He treats his teaching as a means to an end rather than as an end in and of itself. Despite his insistence to the contrary, he teaches so that he may eat. His denials serve only to highlight his greedy nature. Despite having asked for a roast pig's head he claims:

I am a man of litel sustenance;

My spirit hath his fostryng in the Bible.

The body is ay so redy and penyble

To wake, that my stomak is destroyed. (III. 1844-47)

The Friar, however, is as much an example that man cannot live on word alone as on bread alone. The Friar does not practise what he preaches. He goes on to insist that the "orisons" of friars are more effective than those of "burel folk" since friars lead a more abstemious life. This statement is ridiculous in light of the Friar's fondness for fine food. Yet the irony is more complex than it seems, since the Friar's statements on the importance of clean living and fasting ("Whoso wol preye, he moot faste and be clene,/ And fatte his soule, and make his body lene" (III. 1879-80)) are in

accordance with what he *should* believe. It is certainly the case that, were he living as a true Friar, then perhaps his prayers might bear more weight than those of a sinner, but he is not. The impropriety of his actions is highlighted by his own words. His words condemn the sins of others, but also betray his duplicity to the audience. We know that if “the clenness and the fastynge of us freres/ Maketh that Christ accepteth our preyerer” then this Friar's prayers will not be accepted since he is not clean and he does not fast: the words counterfeit (are not *cosyn to*) the deed (l. 742). The greater irony still is that this tale comes to us from the unclean Summoner.

Chaucer creates a duplicitous teller who then, in turn, creates another duplicitous character. It is fundamentally unclear whether the audience is supposed to interpret the obvious duplicity of the Friar as the narrator's ironic comment on the duplicity of the tale's teller, or whether the Summoner is supposed to be commenting on the obvious duplicity of the Pardoner, with whom the Friar shares many obvious similarities. The Friar knows that words are important but treats them as an act of performance. In this tale he pays no attention to their detail, nor to the possibility that they have a real power to heal or to damage. Nor does he seem aware that they have any bearing on his own behaviour. His willingness to allow his actions to deny that which he preaches is one example of this. He cares little for the authority of the letter of Biblical text – for the Friar his own interpretation is enough:

“But herkne now, Thomas, what I shal seyn.

I ne have no text of it, as I suppose,

But I shal fynde it in a maner glose,

That specially oure sweete Lord Jhesus

Spak this by freres, whan he seyde this:

'Blessed be they that povere in spirit been.' (III. 1918-23)

But the Friar's teaching from lines 1885 to 1946 is rooted in biblical scripture. With no knowledge of the speaker one might think it to be an interesting and genuine reflection on the body, the soul and the word. Elijah, we are told, fasted and cleansed his body before being ready to have "any speche/ With hye God, that is oure lyves leche" (III. 1891-92). The body must be clean for the word to be pure and true, and the mode of discourse varies from religious to medical and back again. He quotes psalm 45, "*Cor meum eructavit*", the very heart speaks.<sup>21</sup> In the Psalm, the heart speaks of the love of God, but by quoting this the Friar condemns himself. In his case his heart (and in turn his body) speaks truthfully of his nature, even when he attempts to cloak himself in scripture. The word of God must be lived and acted upon, not merely heard, we are told: "Werkeris of goddes word, nat auditours" (III. 1937). Echoing the physics of the *House of Fame*, to which I shall return later in this chapter, the prayers of the faithful rise up to the ears of God, "right as an hauk up at a sours/ up springeth into th'eir" (III. 1938-9). This teaching is faithful to the Gospels, but the Friar very quickly lays claims to it as if he were a doctor and this were his treatment:

What nedeth yow diverse freres seche?

What nedeth hym that hath a parfit leche

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21 Psalm 45.2: "Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum: dico ego opera mea regi. Lingua mea calamus scribæ velociter scribentis." "My heart has uttered a good word: I speak my works to the king: My tongue is the pen of a scrivener that writes swiftly."

To sechen other leches in the toun? (III. 1955-57)

This is dangerously close to blasphemy. Christ is frequently spoken of as the true *leche* in medieval prayer and poetry, and here the Friar himself takes on the mantle of a jealous god, demanding loyalty from his adherents.

Thomas has the perfect response. His fart is a meaningless word, the inversion of speech, repudiating all the Friar's arguments, and, like Nicholas, offering him a terrible insult. The Friar's complaint to his patron about this incident is telling:

And yet ne greveth me nothyng so soore,

As that this olde cherle with lokkes hoore

Blasphemed hath oure hooly convent eke. (III. 2181-3)

There are layers upon layers of blasphemy here. As noted, the Friar's own self-description as a *leche* has dangerous connotations, but in taking this position he has an interest in maintaining a system of order in which his word has authority.

Thomas's fart, then, is a meta-blasphemy. Where the Friar expects loyalty, like a god expecting prayer, he receives only Thomas's derision. The Friar interprets Thomas's fart as an act of speech – as blasphemy – and promises to “disclaundre hym over al ther I speke” in return (III. 2212). The Friar's patron sees the irony of this situation and teasingly interprets Thomas's fart as an act of “ymaginacioun”. This sets a philosophical conundrum; how to divide the fart equally into twelve divisions.

Despite the fact that Thomas interprets the fart as blasphemous, thereby infusing it with semantic significance, and that his patron then attempts to make a philosophical question of it, infusing it with further alternative semantic

significance, the patron goes on to insist that “The rumblyng of a fart, and every soun,/ Nis but of eir reverberacioun,/ And evere it wasteth litel and litel away” (III. 2233-5). The philosophical approach attempts to rob the incident of its insulting connotations for the Friar but it also belittles the Friar’s own pretensions of grandeur.

Both the *Pardoner’s Tale* and the *Summoner’s Tale* hint at an uneasy distrust in the reliability of the word, and in the ability to control one’s own body and the semantics of the body. The Summoner’s physical appearance belies his own self-portrayal while the Pardoner’s suspect gender identity is coupled with a disturbing frankness about the ways in which he deceives others. Bodily integrity and balance are tied up with the integrity of the word and with semantic meaning – an idea that sits well with the basic tenets of medieval anatomical knowledge, in the sense that imbalanced behaviour might be expected of a man with imbalanced humors. This acts as a neat metaphor for the concerns of writers and philosophers with the stability of meaning in language. The cases of the Pardoner and the Summoner show that Chaucer was conscious of the role of language in the creation of identity and in the relationship between identity and the physical body. Eugene Vance notes that in the *Pardoner’s Tale*, the Pardoner or the Narrator use dyadic (or hierarchical) terms; Rome and England, Latin and English, Lord and Vassal, writing and speech, high style and common speech.<sup>22</sup> Such a dyadic relationship should exist in the text between the language of rational thought and the language of the body, but the

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22 Vance 1989, 731. Vance calls these dyadic terms “power semantic[s]... whereby power relationships within the body politic are controlled.”

*Pardoner's Tale* upsets this relationship by associating the corrupt body of the Pardoner with learned and holy words. Chaucer understood the power of expert discourse in literary contexts. The rest of this chapter will explore further examples of the associations he makes between language, body and meaning, and some of the ways in which he draws the audience's attention to loci of anxiety about the body and its social ordering.

### *The Knight's Tale, Medical Language and Death*

Death is the fundamental body-anxiety. It is an emotional subject and one might expect, therefore, that a poet would choose personal and emotional language to describe a climactic death-scene rather than the expert terminology of medical discourse. The death of Arcite in the *Knight's Tale* is a notoriously gruesome and detailed scene and more than any other passage in the canon it shows Chaucer's interest in the mechanics of human physiology. The language that Chaucer chooses for this scene is curious because it is borrowed from medical discourse. While in the *Pardoner's Tale* and *Summoner's Tale* the audience is led to questions about the appropriateness of the mode of body-discourse used by characters and by pilgrims, in the *Knight's Tale* medical language is used appropriately and accurately to describe death, and yet an audience might feel that such language is inappropriate to such an emotional scene. Nevertheless audience expectations of medical language are over-turned since the scene is in fact very effectively described to create strong emotional impact. Chaucer shows that he can use the dry functional language of

professional discourse to poetic ends. The tale explores the use of functional language to create dramatic effect: it is the cold functionality of his description of the details of Arcite's death that makes it so shocking. Chaucer deliberately exploits medieval anatomical language to realize his description of Arcite's demise. The description of the initial cause of his death, the "furie infernal", avoids giving too much detail, saying that "the blood yronnen in his face" (I. 2693). Initially men trust in medicine:

Men seyde eek that Arcite shal nat dye;  
He shal been heeled of his maladye. (I. 2705-6)

The participants in the trial by battle also trusted medicine for their own wounds, using various "salves... charmes...[and] fermacies of herbes" (I. 2712-4). This reflects practical medical practices as well as medical theory. This belief that wounds can be healed by natural scientific methods, fueled by the confident authority of medical discourse, is cruelly undermined by the detailed and anatomically accurate description of Arcite's demise:

Swellleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore  
Encreeseth at his herte moore and moore.  
The clothered blood, for any lechecraft,  
Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft,  
That neither veyne-blood, ne ventusyng,  
Ne drynke of herbes may ben his helpyng.  
The vertu expulsif, or animal,  
Fro thilke vertu cleped natural

Ne may the venym voyden ne expelle.  
 The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,  
 And every lacerte in his brest adoun  
 Is shent with venym and corrupcioun.  
 Hym gayneth neither, for to gete his lif,  
 Vomyt upward, ne downward laxatif.  
 Al is tobrosten thilke region;  
 Nature hath now no dominacioun.  
 And certainly, ther nature wol nat wirche,  
 Fare wel phisik! Go ber the man to chirche! (I. 2743-60)

This is a brilliant literary device. There is no better way to increase an audience's feeling of helplessness in the face of mysterious nature than to use the language of the natural philosophers, who claimed to understand how things work in the natural world. It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that Chaucer shifts from one mode of discourse to another in his writing and this is a notable example of that technique. The last line of the passage above bids farewell to medicine and acknowledges that perhaps religion is all that is left, and thus the Knight's source of authority changes from medical knowledge to religious faith. Even the very moment of Arcite's death is described in philosophical detail that in another context might not work as a literary device, but that proves very effective in this case:

The vital strengthe is lost and al ago.  
 Oonly the intellect, withouten moore,  
 That dwelled in his herte syk and soore,



Gan faillen whan the herte felte deeth...

.....

...His spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,

As I cam never, I kan nat tellen wher. (I. 2802-10)

Chaucer focuses so intently on Arcite's death because it plays such a pivotal role in the story of the *Knight's Tale*. The natural-philosophical detail of Arcite's death is also appropriate to the Knight's voice, since his is essentially a philosophical tale. It makes sense that the description of Arcite's death refers to philosophy, since philosophy is at the core of the tale itself. Compare this treatment of Arcite's death with that of the *markys* in the *Clerk's Tale*:

Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee

Lyven thise two in concord and in reste...

.....

Til that the soule out of his body crepeth. (IV. 1128-34)

The mode of discourse here is religious. Death's role is one of a peaceful arbiter: this is a natural death and needs no further explanation. It is not intended to provoke disgust and can comfortably be attributed to God and to the normal order of things. Arcite's death, however, is unnatural. He dies of unnatural causes, whether blame is placed on the battle or on the *miracle* that the audience witnesses as an intervention in the normal course of affairs. Yet despite the fact that Arcite's death is brought about by the pagan gods, these can easily be interpreted, by a Christian audience, as the planetary influences under God's control. Responsibility for Arcite's death remains with the natural order of things under divine law, however disturbing an

account of the natural world that might be. The terms of Arcite's death are all the more shocking because they rely on authoritative medical language that has a basis in reality for the medieval audience. Pauline Aiken made a convincing argument that Chaucer's probable source for this expert knowledge is the *Speculum Maius* of Vincent of Beauvais. She notes that Arcite's 'sore' resembles in many details the 'impostume' described in cap. lxxxix of the *Speculum*: "Both arise from blood, both are located at the heart or very near it; both cause swelling and pain, and both result in death".<sup>23</sup> An impostume, or abscess, of this kind is caused by an excess of a humor, in particular blood, and Chaucer makes a point of specifying that "the clothered clodd, for any lechecraft, corrupteth" (I. 2745). Aitken draws many further comparisons and argues that Chaucer's description of the progression of Arcite's illness shows significant medical understanding on his part. Aitken offers a detailed explanation:

In each of the three principal organs of the body – namely, the liver, heart, and brain – is generated one of the "spirits", the mysterious and intangible vital fluids which, flowing through veins, arteries, and nerves, inform the body with vitality, prevent its dissolution, and control the functioning of all its organs. The three spirits, natural, vital, and animal, establish in their respective seats the corresponding "virtues", the vital forces through which the soul mingles itself with the body and directs its actions. In connection with Arcite's case, the seat and instruments of the virtues animal and vital should be noted.

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23 Pauline Aiken, "Arcite's Illness and Vincent of Beauvais," *PMLA* 51.2 (1936): 361-369.

The *virtus animalis* is situated in the brain and functions by means of the nerves. “Animalis... in ventriculis cerebri generatur ac per nervos ad omne corpus mittitur”. The *virtus naturalis* has its seat in the liver. Its *spiritus* is diffused through the veins. “Naturalis virtus operatur in e parte sanguinem et alios humres, quos per venas ad omni corporis membra transmittit ut inde augeantur & nutriantur”. The *naturalis*, then, controls venous blood, and Chaucer is correct in his statement that it is “thilke vertu cleped natural” which must be purged of venom if Arcite's life is to be saved.<sup>24</sup>

The *virtus animalis* was associated with breathing, and although it was seated in the brain, its functions could be affected by a wound to the breast, since its impulses were carried by means of the nerves. Aiken argues that a layman would have picked the *vitalis* (since it controls breathing) as the cause of Arcite's trouble, but in this case the impostume had not reached that far:

The heart still continued to beat, thereby causing the *dilitatio* and *reductio* which should have resulted in exhalation and inhalation. The more distant *animalis*, however, crippled by the serious injury to its channels, the nerves, could no longer produce a sufficient muscular contraction and expansion of the chest to carry on adequately the act of breathing.<sup>25</sup>

According to Vincent, the body then loses the ability to expel a noxious humor (such as blood in the breast) – as happens to Arcite. Aiken argues that the “extraordinary

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<sup>24</sup> Aiken 1936, 364.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 365-66.

similarity” of certain phrases (for example, “in pulmonis cannalibus” with “pypes of his longes”, and “lacertis pectoris” with “every lacerte in his breast”) “might suggest the conjecture that Chaucer was writing with the *Speculum* open before him”.<sup>26</sup> Her conclusion is sweeping, but persuasive:

...every medical detail referred to by Chaucer, not only in the passage discussed... but also in Dame Pertelote's advice to her husband in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, in the description of the Summoner's malady, and the summary of the Doctor of Physic's qualifications, is, without exception, included in the *Speculum*... It is the clearest and most readable summary of scientific knowledge known to the period.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that the language Chaucer uses is much influenced by specialist discourses. Many of the words are English variants of their Latin originals. On the other hand Chaucer substitutes native words like 'sore' on occasion, and it is not always clear what his rationale is for choosing a Latin or a native form. Choice may be driven by necessity: perhaps he uses Latin forms where native forms do not exist. This is not entirely convincing, however. Language often tolerates the co-existence of words of similar meaning from more than one linguistic origin. The most commonly cited examples of this are words of Anglo-Saxon origin for living animals and words of French origin for their meat. This example, however, demonstrates the usefulness of different words in different registers. The different words for flesh and meat are different because in their various uses they take on new meanings.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid 368.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 369.

Chaucer is also interested in register and his characters usually choose words in a register that suits their social status or that is appropriate to the context in which they are speaking. The words Chaucer chooses also affect the tone of his writing, however. Medical language is used to describe death in the *Knight's Tale* not because that is the appropriate register, but rather because of the tone it creates. As professional language it seems rather cold and yet Chaucer is able to use it to tap into the emotions of his audience. Chaucer's language choice, therefore, serves to illustrate the brutality of Arcite's demise by rooting it in terms that are abstract and that should not strictly be associated with a passage of high emotion. In the drama of Arcite's death, Chaucer brings together the language of the abstract, of the philosophical, and of learned medicine with the uncomfortable reality of death, one of our key bodily experiences. Walker Bynum uses death to ground her discussion of the body. She argues that

...new philosophical theories did more than threaten specific religious practices. They tended to make body itself into a concept, to dissolve body into theory... The abstractions of the philosophers and theologians were not so much defeated as simply and very effectively ignored by the poets and mystics, preachers and storytellers, of the later Middle Ages.<sup>28</sup>

In this poem, however, Chaucer does not ignore philosophy. Rather he uses it to demonstrate the seriousness of grounded, bodily existence. The use of grounded, comprehensible, indeed logical, philosophical language to describe Arcite's death is

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28 Walker Bynum and Gerson 32.

so disturbing precisely because in using it Chaucer mixes discourses. The audience has already seen that Arcite's death is caused by divine intervention. To then describe Arcite's death in terms that call on the authority of medieval natural philosophy is to create anxiety about the authority of the discourse itself. Medical discourse does explain the process of Arcite's death, but without the narrator's intervention to explain to us that the gods (or God, through the stars, if the audience prefers) intervene in human affairs, the discourse of natural philosophy would leave the audience ignorant as to the real cause of the fatality. It is only the omniscience of the narrator that provides the audience with access to the true nature of Arcite's demise. The audience for his death within the poem, that is the other characters and in particular Theseus, are unaware of the divine intervention and so have greater reason to trust in the natural-philosophical account of Arcite's death. Chaucer demonstrates the limits of authoritative discourse in explaining matters of the body, and points to the limited perspective of human authorities. If the *Summoner's Tale* and *Pardoner's Tale* create anxiety because of their duplicitous narrators and characters, it is authoritative discourse itself that is undermined in the *Knight's Tale*, as the language of medicine is shown to take the audience only so far in its comprehension of Arcite's death. In the *House of Fame* we see another example of Chaucer's intertwining of authoritative discourses.

*The House of Fame and Authoritative Discourse*

*The House of Fame* is a challenging poem because Chaucer attempts to explain through metaphor, and by borrowing the language of the science of sound, the abstract process involved in the spread of reputation. One might think of this as an early attempt at a social-scientific explanation of human relations. While attempting to explore concepts that are decidedly non-physical, however, the poem takes physical concerns as its first principles and calls upon the language of medicine and natural philosophy to explain a social process. The *proem* opens with a meditation on the possible causes of human dreams. As discussed in the earlier chapters, medieval natural philosophy was dependent on authority rather than experiment. The narrator's discussion of human dreams seems both a genuine attempt to summarize learned approaches to dream theory and an acknowledgement that the medieval understanding of dreams is based largely on authoritative texts. The narrator frames the discussion as a series of questions and also calls upon the suggestions that "other sayn" (*House of Fame*, 23). Some dreams, it is acknowledged, are followed by *th'effect*, or the playing out of their prediction. Dreams are spoken of in a language that echoes the predictive work of contemporary astronomers:<sup>29</sup>

...To knowe of hir signiffiaunce

The gendres, neyther the distaunce

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29 It echoes especially the work of mathematical astronomers, who argued that they alone could provide accurate predictions of the motions of the planets. A key text, extant in more than 200 copies, is the anonymous *Theorica Planetarum*. See Olaf Pedersen, 'Astronomy', *Science in the Middle Ages*, ed. David C. Lindberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Of tymes of hem, ne the causes,

Or why this more then that cause is- (*HF*, 17-20)

Distances, perhaps between dreams, invoke the mathematical calculations of astronomers and imply an association between astronomical or astrological predictions of future physical heavenly events based on patterns in observed past events, and in the analysis of dreams. The narrator's language is ambiguous but deliberately invokes medieval scientific practice. Immediately another authoritative mode of discourse is invoked, that of medicine. Dreams may be predictive in some cases, but the dreams here described are the result of a humoral imbalance of the body:

As yf folkys complexions

Make hem dreame of reflexions,

Or ellys thus, as other sayn,

For to gret feblenesse of her brayn,

By abstinence or by seknesse,

Or ellys by dysordynaunce

Of natural acostumaunce,

That som man is to curious

In studye, or melancolyous,

Or thus so inly ful of drede

That no man may hym bote bede... (*HF*, 21-32)

On the one hand the narrator borrows the conventional language of medicine to lend authority to his musings or at least to imply that this contemplation on the



meaning of dreams is informed by scholarship. On the other hand his ideas are reported in a very uncertain manner; no explanation is given more authority than any other and really all are offered as hearsay. Each is an explanation taken from some authoritative discourse and each is, in a sense, gossip. This is an appropriate opening for a poem that centres on rumour and reputation. Furthermore the very multiplicity of explanations given serves only to undermine the authority that the poet can derive from these borrowed modes of discourse. The various explanations are broken up by “or ellys...or ellys... or thus... or else”. There is no certainty here.

The narrator quickly moves on to the third mode of discourse that will recur in later work alongside both astronomy and medicine; the language of love:

...Or that the cruel lyf unsofte  
Which these ilke lovers leden  
That hopen over-muche or dreden,  
That purely her impressions  
Causeth hem avisions; (*HF*, 36-40)

Such dreams fit well with the other negative effects of love in this tradition: sighing, restlessness, an inability to sleep, loss of appetite, and so on. This is followed, in turn, by a shift to folk tradition: perhaps sprites cause dreams, and perhaps they warn us of future dangers and events. The audience is reminded that this group of answers, or in reality this lack of answers, derives from clerical modes of discourse:

Wel worthe of this thyng grete clerkys  
That trete of this and other werkes... (*HF*, 53-54)

This is preceded by an acknowledgement of the mystery of the relationship between the abstract and the physical senses: "...that oure flesshe ne hath no myght/ To understonde hyt aryght" (*HF*, 49-50). The narrator moves from echoes of astronomy to medical language through the discourses of love and myth and on to an invocation of the *god of sleep*. By beginning the poem with reference to potential scientific approaches to the problem of dreams, the narrator leaves the audience somewhat unprepared for an invocation of the classical god of sleep. The world of dreams is connected to the body by the physical causes of dreams and the physical nature of love-sickness. Later, the physicality of love problems is reaffirmed by reference to a proverb:

Therefore I wol seye a proverbe,

That "he that fully knoweth th'erbe

May saufly leye hyt to his yē"-

Withoute drede, this ys no lye. (*HF*, 289-92)

This proverb, that a man who understands a remedy may safely use it, is here used in reference to problems of love but uses the language of popular medicine. The *proem* to the *House of Fame* calls upon authoritative discourse while inverting the normal relationship between the authoritative text and the audience. The narrator uses these modes of discourse but frames his own discussion as a series of questions rather than a series of pronouncements. If in the other poems examined the reliability of authority is called into question, in this poem the relationship of the audience to authority is explored. In asking these questions, in wondering about the origins of dreams and in showing that authoritative discourses have few helpful

explanations, the narrator makes room for the audience's own musings on the origins of dreams. The poem opens up the discursive possibility of moving beyond the citation of authority for the creation of knowledge to something else, that is, the creation of new theories. In the *House of Fame* this is what the narrator attempts to do and the *proem* establishes a scenario in which the legitimacy of authority is not undermined so much as shown to be open-ended.

The *proem* also shifts the attention of the audience from the realm of the physical to the realm of the ethereal. It has been argued that the *House of Fame* is inspired by, and responds to, Dante's *Commedia*, and while this is apparent in the subject matter of the narrator's dream, the poem's introduction also models its thematic movement on the idea of a journey from one realm to another. The movement from physical concerns to abstract social concerns (those of reputation) is brought about by a narrator who draws attention to the profound physical consequences of abstract social matters. This is apparent in the movement from the Temple of Glas to the House of Fame itself. The tragic lovers of the Temple of Glas are described not only in terms of their loss but also of the physical consequences of their love-tragedies. Love and abstract *wikke Fame* are anything but abstract in their consequences for Dido:

But what! When this was seyde and doo,  
 She rof hirselve to the herte  
 And deyde thorgh the wounde smerte. (*HF*, 371-4)

Phyllis commits suicide: "when she wiste that he was fals,/ She heng hirself ryght be the hals" (*HF*, 393-94). A catalogue of betrayed lovers repeatedly depicts false men

whose lives are saved by lovers they then betray; "...so she saved hym hys lyf,/ He wolde have take hir to hys wif" (*HF*, 423-24). Despite these physical consequences of human action the House of Fame, the Eagle tells the narrator, serves to recompense the labour and devotion of man to Cupid. This is a double-edged sword, however, since we later discover that there is ill-repute as well as fame. This poem elucidates the abstract consequences of human action, even after human life on earth has come to an end. It is interesting, however, that despite the abstract nature of Fame and reputation, the poet chooses to (or perhaps can only) speak about it in terms that are pseudo-scientific (in the sense that the House itself is an artistic invention, not that the science is not credible to contemporary thinkers). Indeed the third book's invocation is made to the "God of science and of lyght" (*HF*, 1091). The eagle explains the physics of the House of Fame in terms borrowed from Aristotelian science:

That every kyndely thing that is  
 Hath a kyndely stede the he  
 May best in hyt conserved by;  
 Unto which place every thyng  
 Thorgh his kyndely enclynynge  
 Moveth for to come to  
 Whan that hyt is away therfro...  
 ...Ryght so seye I be fyr or soun,  
 Or smoke or other thynges lyghte;  
 Alwey they seke upward on highte,

While ech of hem is at his large:  
 Lyght thing upward, and dounward charge...  
 ...Thus every thing, by thys reson,  
 Hath his propre mansyon  
 To which seketh to repaire,  
 Ther-as hit shulde not apaire... (HF, 730-56)

Speech being sound, the eagle says, and sound being but broken air (a theory that echoes the Friar's patron's argument in the *Summoner's Tale*), there is a rightful place to which it must flow – the *House of Fame*. Just as the opening meditations on the causes of dreams tried to give physical explanations for an immaterial phenomenon so the eagle's lecture insists on the physical consequences of all human action, even speech, whether "lowd or pryvee spoken" (HF, 810). This theory of sound has been elucidated by many critics. Chaucer's sources were most probably Boethius's *De Institutione Musica* (1.3)<sup>30</sup> and Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Naturale* (4.14). John Fyler notes that "the eagle's proof does have the effect of reducing language to the physical equivalent of any other noise or sound; and the eagle often pairs *speche* and *soun* thus blurring the distinction between them".<sup>31</sup> This blurring of meaningful language and meaningless sound serves to draw attention to the normal distinction made between language, associated with the scholarly or the abstract, that is at the level of meaning, and mere sound, which the body produces in many ways, for example as flatulence (as discussed earlier).<sup>32</sup>

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30 Boethius, *De Institutione Musica*, trans C.M. Bower (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989).

31 John M. Fyler in *Riverside Chaucer*, 983.

32 John Leyerle, "Chaucer's Windy Eagle," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971): 247-65.

The language of the *House of Fame* is informed by this insistence on the connection between the physical and the immaterial, which is to be found elsewhere in Chaucer's poetry. For example, the narrator is told to cast his face and eyes upward to the skies, a gesture that recurs in other poems, such as the *Book of the Duchess* (BD, 212). In Chaucer's short poem, *Truth*, Vache is told: "Know thi contré! loke up! thonk God of al!" (*Truth*, 19). The eye is an important link between the physical and the immaterial, being the conduit for Cupid's arrows in contemporary love poetry and here it serves a similar purpose, acting to connect the narrator's physical self and the revealed truths that the Eagle shows him. The narrator's response to this highlights his wonder:

"O God," quod y, "that made Adam,  
 Moche ys thy myght and thy noblesse!"  
 And thoo thoughte y upon Boece,  
 That writ, "A thought may flee so hye  
 Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,  
 To passen everych element,  
 And when he hath so fer ywent,  
 Than may be seen behynde hys bak  
 Cloude" - and al that y of spak. (*HF*, 970-78)

The early uncertainty of the poem is revived, and the narrator remarks that he "wexen in a were" and does not know whether he is in this place in "body or in gost" (*HF*, 979-81). Words that rise to the House of Fame take on the form of the earthly body that produced them, so much so that it seems "the same body be/ Man or

woman, he or she" (*HF*, 1080-82).<sup>33</sup> Chaucer's language of the body, then, is loaded with meaning. While his lovers' hearts are destroyed by their tragedy, here he must explain the presence of the body in an essentially immaterial place.

In the House of Fame we find another catalogue, this time of those who produce word and sound – minstrels, pipers, even magicians and witches. One stands out as particularly relevant to this discussion, Marsyas:

And Marcia that loste her skyn,  
And in face, body and chyn,  
For that she wolde envien, loo,  
To pipen bet than Appolloo. (*HF*, 1229-32)

Chaucer seems to follow Dante's invocation at the beginning of the *Paradiso* (I, 19-21) and like Dante he takes Marsyas to be a woman.<sup>34</sup> Austin believes Chaucer to have been independently following Ovid, but it seems as likely that he followed Dante here. Marcia's punishment is curiously appropriate: as if physicality and meaning are somehow separate, she is stripped of her skin for trying to create a meaning that would rival that of a god's. This is the same punishment as we find in Ovid and in Dante, but it is notable that Chaucer chooses this image in particular. The physical consequences of sound (indeed of immaterial art) are further implied in the "bloody soun/ In trumpe, beme, and claryoun" (*HF*, 1239-40), and in the "magyk naturel... To make a man ben wel or syk" (*HF*, 1266-70). As noted in the earlier discussion of Anglo-Saxon medicine, natural magic and associated charms

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the *voces paginarum*, or the ancient idea that letters on the page aim to re-present speech, see V. J. Scattergood, *Manuscripts and Ghosts: Essays on the Transmission of Medieval and Early Renaissance Literature in England* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006) 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> D. H. Austin, "Dante Notes," *Modern Language Notes* 49.5 (1934): 312-316.

and folk medicine had a strong oral component, and so a reference to *magyk naturel* is very likely a reference to spoken charms. In Book III of the *House of Fame* an engaging series of repetitions describes, in a list of largely abstract nouns, the make-up of the *House* itself. Most of the list can be divided into two sub-groups, one related to abstract human emotions, and the other to concerns of the body. They are intermingled, but together show the mixed concerns of this poem. The physical concerns are telling:

Of abood, of deeth, of lyf...

Of hele, of syknesse, of bildynges...

Of qwalm of folk, and eke of beestes;

Of dyvers transmutacions...

Of plente, and of gret famyne...

Of fyr, and of dyvers accident (*HF*, 1963-76)

These are solid concerns of the body, but in the same list are found *love, hate, acord, stryf, trust, drede*, and *jelousye*, all human emotions connected with human feeling rather than with the physical needs of the body. As has been mentioned before, however, there is a holistic attitude to emotional and physical well-being in medieval thought. The connection between physical well-being and emotional states or abstract things is made explicit in this poem. *The House of Fame* was written at the point in Chaucer's career when he is thought to have been strongly influenced by Italian writing. The poem shares this concern for the connection between the physical and the abstract with later works such as *Troilus and Crisyde* but here Chaucer, in an earlier stage of development as a poet, makes explicit concerns that



are implicit in the language of the later poems. *Troilus and Criseyde* shares the *House of Fame*'s association of the tongue and mouth with gossip, for instance (*HF*, 2068-82).<sup>35</sup> There are still hints of the way Chaucer would use the language of the body to relate anxiety about bodily instability, however. The best example of this in the *House of Fame* is in the description of Lady Fame herself, with her many eyes and tongues. Fame may be many-eyed and -tongued but indeed the eye and tongue remain important to Chaucer in later poetry when he tries to invoke the significance of talk and reputation in human affairs:

A femynyne creature,  
That never formed by Nature  
Nas such another thing yseye...  
For as feeles eyen hadde she  
As fetheres upon foules be..  
Had also fele upstondyng eres  
And tonges, as on bestes heres; (*HF*, 1365-90)

This is a powerful image: why mention beasts when the attribute associated with her is so human? Are the eyes like feathers reminiscent of the peacock familiar to medieval bestiaries? If so, what is the significance of this association? There are so many questions that could be asked about this wondrous creature, Fame, and this uncertainty seems to be part of her enigmatic nature.

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35 The Italian influences on this early poem have long been well known. Lydgate alludes to Chaucer's Dantean influences by ascribing the *House of Fame* to 'Dante in Inglissh' in his list of Chaucer's works in the *Fall of Princes*. The precise dating of Chaucer's dream-vision in this poem corresponds to that in Dante's *Commedia*, as well as Machaut's *Dit du Lyon* and *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*. It is also generally agreed that this is an early poem, written before *Troilus and Criseyde*, usually dated to about 1379-80.

With respect to Chaucer's use of the language of the body, then, the *House of Fame* serves to flag up some of his early concerns. These concerns with bodily instability and with the power of language to have a real effect on the body do not disappear in later works, but perhaps become more integrated into the language of the texts, rather than being explicitly imagined in Ovidian examples. This poem offers a relatively explicit representation of Chaucer's interest in the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical. His approach to these issues will change, but some of the imagery he uses (for example that of the eye and the tongue) will remain important. He appears to integrate the explicit anxiety of Ovid with regard to bodily stability into the language of the body that appears in later works. Furthermore, his use of different modes of authoritative discourse will remain and in the *Canterbury Tales*, as we have seen, will add authority to some characters, but in relation to others, such as the Pardoner and the Summoner, will seem out of place and will raise questions about why Chaucer would choose to ascribe such terms to a particular character (Pertelote, for example).

### *The Wife of Bath: Challenging Discourses of Authority*

If the *House of Fame* explores how an author can move beyond authoritative discourse and if the *Summoner's Tale* and *Pardoner's Tale* raise concerns about the appropriateness of authoritative discourse to untrustworthy speakers, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* depict a character who understands the limitations of authoritative discourse, who challenges such authority and argues instead for the

primacy of experience, and who can in fact manipulate such discourse at will. The audience, having its sense of security in body-discourse undermined, witnesses in her a character who embodies many potential anxieties about body-discourse and its limitations. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* reflects Alys' attitudes to the body and to the relationship between romantic love, the body, and power, attitudes that she communicates in her own words in the *Prologue*. In the tale itself a "lusty bachelor" rapes a maiden and learns the error of his ways by being punished with the task of discovering "what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (III. 905). His crime was a crime of the body, rape, and as a result the queen makes it clear that it is *his* body that is now at stake if he cannot discover the answer (III. 911-12). The solution relies on the same justice as a chivalric trial by combat. It is implied that he will discover the answer that will save his life only through God's beneficence: "with swich answeere as God wolde hym purveye" (III. 917). Just as a trial by single combat is supposed to allow God's justice to be enacted through Providence, so the lusty bachelor must rely on divine justice to save him if he can show sufficient humility. The audience is presented with a short catalogue of suggested answers that are, implicitly, incorrect: that women want riches, honour, *jolynesse*, rich array, lust, or to have many husbands. The answer, when it is finally revealed, is associated with control and power, that is, *sovereyntee* over their spouses and the right to make their own decisions in love. These are the same privileges that the lusty bachelor has enjoyed as a man. But ironically he must give the old *wyf* this sovereignty before he is given the answer. He agrees to do the very next thing that she requires of him in exchange for the information that will save his life. In a sense, then, he must show

humility first in order to be granted forgiveness, very much in line with the idea that it is God who decides his fate. On the other hand, he appears to show later that he has not been fully convinced and experiences distress when the old *wyf* requests that he marry her (1055-7). Just as he has earlier taken the body of another by force, now he is forced to submit to an analogous punishment and this is reflected in his reaction to the request:

This knyght answerde, “allas and weylawey!

I woot right wel that swich was my biheste.

For Goddes love, as cheese a newe requeste!

Taak al my good and lat my body go.” (III. 1058-61)

On the one hand, he resorts to pleading for Christian mercy, a mercy that he has already received in the course of events by being given an opportunity to save his own life. On the other hand, he shows that his concern is still very much for his body. First he has to save himself from death, but here he prioritizes his bodily integrity over his wealth (the same priority that we normally see in female characters). The tale projects bodily anxieties that are normally associated with female characters and brought about by male aggression onto a male character. This becomes particularly significant when the tale is read in the light of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The knight's concern is not solely bodily. He is also concerned with his status and with the potential indignity of marrying below his station:

“My love?” quod he, “nay, my dampnacioun!

Allas that any of my nacioun

Sholde ever so foule disparaged be!” (III. 1067-69)

The notion that bodily well-being and social reputation are connected has already been introduced in the *House of Fame* and here we see the issue not in a dream but in the very real concerns of the lusty bachelor's trials. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale* the audience is presented with a fresh set of evidence for associating reputation with bodily concerns. The knight thinks of *gentillesse* as residing in his blood. The *wyf's* response is withering: "Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen" (III. 1112). She argues that gentility comes not from one's lineage but from Christ and from individual actions. She argues against inherited *gentillesse*:

"Eek every wight woot this as wel as I,  
 If gentillesse were planted natureelly  
 Unto a certeyn lynage doun the lyne,  
 Pryvee and apert thanne wolde they nevere fyne  
 To doon of gentillesse the faire office;  
 They myghte do no vileynye or vice. (III. 1133-38)

This echoes Chaucer's short poem, *Gentillesse*:

And but his heir love vertu as dide he,  
 He is nat gentil, though he riche seeme,  
 Al were he mitre, crowne, or diademe. (*Gentillesse*, 12-14)

It is interesting to note that in *Gentillesse*, while *stok*, or blood-line, is mentioned, the central images are the the *mitre*, *crowne* or *diademe*, the symbols of the power and status of a bishop, king and emperor, respectively. The poet argues that even these do not necessarily confirm true *gentillesse*. The *wyf's* argument is more firmly an argument against an assumption that blood is a guarantee of genuine *gentillesse*.

The argument is the same but the point is made in a different way and the *wyf's* concern is more with assumptions about the body and about blood-line. The knight must again submit and show that he has fully learned his lesson by refusing to choose whether she should be true but old, or beautiful but faithless. He finally gives her full sovereignty. There is a number of points of intersection between issues raised by this tale and the concerns of the Wife of Bath herself. Men's assumptions about their wives' behaviour based on their attractiveness is one such instance (Alys makes a complaint about this in the *Prologue*).

What is immediately apparent from the story of the lusty bachelor is that for the Wife of Bath marriage and love are acts of bodily possession. This is reflected as much in the knight's concern for his body, mentioned above, as in Alys' own account of her relationships with her husbands in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Alys emphasizes *her* power over the *body* of her husband. She expects him to pay his debt with his body:

An housbonde I wol have – I wol nat lette -  
 Which shal be both my dettour and my thral,  
 And have his tribulacioun withal  
*Upon his flessch*, whil that I am his wyf  
 I have the power durynge al my lyf  
*Upon his propre body*, and noght he. (III. 155-59) [my italics]

Alys's description of her husband echoes but subverts the similarly constructed description of Dorigen's relationship with her husband in the *Franklin's Tale*, "her housbande and hir lord" (V. 742). This points to the fact that the bodily possession

for which Alys aims is a mirror image of male expectations of women in other texts. Indeed, the Pardoner's immediate response to Alys is: "why sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere?" (III. 167). In addition, the lusty bachelor's body anxieties are related to the kinds of anxieties we find in Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde*. While it is not a novel suggestion to say that the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* invert normal expectations of men and women in marital or sexual relationships, it is interesting to note that this inversion extends to the way male and female characters think and talk about their bodies and the bodies of others. Alys displays possessive impulses towards the body of her mate that a medieval audience would normally associate with a male character, and the Pardoner and the lusty bachelor experience body anxieties normally associated with female objects of desire. Alys positions herself as a dominant figure among other women as well as among men: "In al the Parisshe wif ne was ther noon/ That to the offrynge bifore hire wholde goon" (I. 448-9). Her actions indicate that she sees her primacy at the *offrynge* in church as an indicator of her social position. She has had five husbands and there is an implication that she has had "oother compaignye in youthe" (I. 461). She has travelled much on pilgrimage, a detail that reinforces the impression that she is a woman of experience. Chaucer creates in the character of Alys a figure who refuses to accept the supremacy of scholarly experience over lived experience.

The language of both the *Prologue* and the *Tale* itself draw attention to this. Alys appears to value her image as a woman of experience although the audience might question whether she has wisdom to match her experience. Alys opens her own prologue with a declaration of the supremacy of experience over authority. She

creates a dichotomy between that which can be learned through doing and that which can be learned from others. It is clear that when Alys speaks of experience she speaks of *physical* experience. Her well-known remark that “diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes, / and diverse practyk in many sondry werkes/ Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly” (III. 44c-f) serves to suggest that she thinks of her own wisdom as that of *praktyk*, despite having been schooled by five husbands. Her approach to topics of scholarly debate is to question what can be learned from theoretical knowledge. Her discussion of the purpose of the “membres ... of generacion” is amusing but also makes a powerful argument for the importance of experience. Alys is aware of the theoretical debate about the purpose of the *membres* but she concludes that experience tells us best what they are for: “I sey this: that they maked ben for both [purgacioun and generacion]” (III. 126). Alys is described in the *General Prologue* as a woman of experience, experience that has given her an understanding of both life and men. As is the case with some of the other pilgrims the narrator’s description of her body hints at her underlying character. In her own prologue she elaborates on her humoral disposition:

For certes, I am al Venerien

In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.

Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,

And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;

Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne. (III. 609-13)

On the one hand she has insisted on the importance of experience over learned authority. On the other hand she uses the discourse of astrological learning to



explain her constitution. The intricate relationship that she sets up between physical experience and learned authority is further complicated by her use of the euphemism “the beste *quoniam*” (III. 608), a reference to the vagina. She uses a scholarly *terme* euphemistically. This is a striking example of Chaucer’s exploration of the effect of giving *termes* to inappropriate speakers. Neither the Summoner nor the Pardoner seem aware of their misuse of *termes*. Alys seems more knowing, however, and her use of *quoniam* is another sign of her disdain for scholarly discourse, since she reappropriates the word to describe a physical feature of her body. She also uses the word *glose* in a variety of ways that can appear rather unorthodox. She speaks of herself as something that her lover glosses in bed. This refers to her lover’s flattery of her in order to gain sexual favour, although the word’s scholarly meaning comes to mind, especially since it is used in this way at III. 26. Her lover’s skill in seducing her despite his violence is here, perhaps, compared to his skill as a scholar:

But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,  
 And therwithal so wel koude he me glose,  
 Whan that he wolde han my *bele chose*;  
 That thogh he hadde me bete on every bon,  
 He koude wyne agayn my love anon. (III. 508-12)

Alys ironically compares physical lust, allied as it is with the hunger for physical experience, with the hunger for knowledge that is characteristic of the scholarly tradition. Alys believes that her manifold physical experiences should not be thought of as less valuable than those to be found in the learned sciences merely

because her learning is associated with the body. Associated as it is with rational functions, Alys' comparison of the thirst for knowledge with human lust serves to ground and demystify it.

Alys' experiential learning has not come to her easily and it has literally marked her body. Her fight with her husband illustrates her combative relationship with the realm of scholarly learning. One might suggest that it explains her hostility towards book-learning. The initial description of Jankyn's violence towards Alys demonstrates the way in which he has physically altered her body through violence:

By God, he smoot me ones on the lyst,  
For that I rente out of his book a leef,  
That of the strook myn ere wax al deef. (III. 624-26)

Jankyn *gloses* her in order to gain sexual favour but he also uses physical force when he wants to. Alys explains that she ripped the pages out of the book because of the nature of its content. Her fight is caused by her frustration at her husband; he uses authoritative misogynistic discourse to gain power over her. One might suggest that her emotional response to scholarly learning is a product of her feelings for and frustrations with her husband. Another reading might suggest that an aspect of her frustration with her husband is his love for scholarly learning and for the authoritative discourse from which Alys is partly excluded and that condemns her as a woman. She again physically rips pages out of the book (III. 790) and then hits her husband on the cheek. His response is violent in return. One might read this incident as an ironic illustration of the kind of experiential learning that Alys supposedly values. A misogynistic reading might see her physical marks as symbolic

of the lesson she has been taught by her husband. This pedagogical reading of the prologue supports the view that the knight is forced to learn in the tale itself, not through authority, but through physical experience. Were the fight to have ended there then it might be an appropriate reading. It is certainly clear that Alys thinks such a physical lesson is the most appropriate for men who do not treat women as she believes they should:

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
 That noght wol governed by hir wyves;  
 And olde and angry nigardes of dispence,  
 God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (III. 1261-64)

Alys' account of the incident makes explicit the ways in which women's bodies (and indeed all bodies) can be 'marked' by human experience.

Alys' violent struggles with Jankyn are ultimately about authority in the household and where it is vested. In Alys' eyes, books threaten her because they are misogynistic and because they provide a vehicle for Jankyn to develop his negative attitudes towards her and they give him a vocabulary and mode of discourse to express them. The way Alys resolves the fight is particularly interesting. She feigns death and in doing so she makes Jankyn aware of her value to him. But in order for this to happen Alys has had to change the terms of the discussion between herself and her husband. It was noted earlier that Nicholas' behaviour in the *Miller's Tale* is a feminization of his character. Alys' relationship with Jankyn before the fight neatly illustrates many of the ideas concerning gender in medieval thought. Jankyn is associated with learning and reason and Alys is not. This led to the power imbalance

in their relationship. In provoking a physical response from Jankyn, Alys levels the playing field. In the same way that Nicholas in the *Miller's Tale* may be seen as feminized, so this may be seen as a feminization of Jankyn. It is certainly the case that Alys has reclaimed authority over Jankyn, where books had taken authority away from her (or one might say Jankyn has claimed authority for himself, using the book as a tool). The final result is humorously understated:

After that day we hadden never debaat. (III. 822)

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* draw attention to the dichotomy that existed in medieval thought between learned authority and experiential learning. It associates experience with the body, with sex, and with disease and pain. Alys ironically undercuts this dichotomy by insisting on mixing the discourse of scholarly learning with body discourse, making light of the supposed dichotomy and also arguing for a more positive understanding of the kind of learning to which she has access: lived experience. The prologue is a useful gloss for the tale itself. The tale's relevance to this discussion of the language of the body is really only apparent in light of Alys' attitude in the prologue.

### *Troilus and Criseyde: the Body and Morality*

*Troilus and Criseyde* presents another set of characters whose experiences are marked on their bodies. This poem would inspire Robert Henryson's response in the *Testament of Cresseid* which will be examined in the following chapter. In *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer brings together the discourses of medicine and of love-

sickness (the *termes* of love) to retell a tragedy in language that focuses on the physical nature of human relationships and on the physical experience of human emotions. The language of the poem draws attention to the protagonists' corporeality. The poem elaborates on the body's role in human action. For much of the poem the characters' actions are explained through the motions of their body parts, drawing the audience's attention to the physicality of their emotions.<sup>36</sup> Body parts act as signifiers in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Such signification is apparent both in the use of gesture and in the physical descriptions of characters. Chaucer's focus on body parts as a means of signifying emotion might be read as a method of rendering his characters realistically. Naturally Chaucer borrows many of his descriptions of body parts from his sources, but those that he does use are woven together in a significant fashion. In *Troilus and Criseyde* eyes, tongues and hearts seem to lead lives of their own, independent in the language of the text from their owners. They are used to represent symbolic threats, central concerns, and foci of attention for the characters in the poem. Despite the characters' ownership of these body-parts they appear to have less than perfect control over them. Again, these experiences are described in terms that are both emotional *and* physical. In some passages of literary description eyes are representative of characters' intentions, and the protagonists appear to have far more control over them. This perception of the role of the eyes is undermined, however, when Troilus falls in love with Criseyde. He becomes a slave to his eyes and of course to his heart. The overall effect here is one

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36 Mary F. Wack, "Lovesickness in *Troilus*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 19.1-2 (1984): 55. She argues that the medical model of love provided Chaucer with a "materialistic, deterministic, and ethically neutral view of love which he used to shape the thematic development of *Troilus and Criseyde*."

of distance between a character and the parts of his or her body that one might normally consider to be integral to them. Chaucer appears to highlight lack of control over the body and, moreover, the body's control over the rational self. I will first discuss the poet's use of these body parts and then return to the quasi-medical discourse of love-sickness that we find in the poem to see what relationship the distance of body parts from their owners has with this discourse. Chaucer seems to enjoy using body-parts as a way of describing his characters rather than simply narrating their actions. His narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde*, moreover, is framed as a speaker whose gaze is constantly drawn to body parts. Consequently the audience's gaze is also directed towards body-parts. When the text tells us what someone's hand does, or where someone's eyes focus, it is the *narrator's* gaze that we follow.

Much of Criseyde's early anxiety about accepting Troilus's advances comes from a concern for her reputation. She is in a precarious position because of her father's treacherous actions and she relies very much on the good will of the community for her safety – a scandalous liaison with Troilus would do little for her well-being. It is worth remembering that when Calkas fled, “Gret rumour gan, whan it was first aspid / Thorough al the town, and generally was spoken” (*TC*, I. 85-86). Bu contrast to Criseyde's frequently poor reputation in later texts, such as Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* and in Chaucer's main source, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*,<sup>37</sup> here Criseyde is portrayed with considerable sympathy. Her character

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37 The French *Roman de Troilus* (likely by Pierre or Louis de Beauveau) is often presented as another likely source. It is a faithful translation and Criseyde is represented in the same way as she is in *Filostrato* so whether or not Chaucer used it as another source is not relevant to this discussion. See Pratt, *Studies in Philology*, 1956, 509-39. Chaucer also knew Benoit de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. It is unclear whether he used any Latin sources apart from *Frigii Daretis Ylias*, the version of Dares translated by Joseph of Exeter. See John Fyler, *Riverside Chaucer*. 1021.

has become very much a matter of critical opinion and it is as if Criseyde's anxieties concerning her reputation in *Troilus and Criseyde* are informed by the critical tradition that helped to shape Chaucer's understanding of her. Chaucer's understanding of the power of reputation and rumour is obvious in the *House of Fame* but it plays an important role here too. Reputation is not just a literary concern. There is evidence to suggest that gossip played an influential part in real world disputes in the Middle Ages. Schofield notes that "...both expectation and strategy flow from and respond to cultural norms such as, for example, the social acceptability of cheating or of beating one's neighbour. Courts and the rule of law are then seen as but elements within the wider framework of dispute settlement".<sup>38</sup> In other words social justice was a product not just of the rule of law but also of one's reputation. Community behaviour towards an individual was deeply influenced by public perceptions of him or her. In court records such as the one examined by Schofield, reports and rumour are presented with their sources – courts of law require a source even for reports that are brought to them. Public standards are not so high, however, and in *Troilus and Criseyde* rumour is rendered all the more dangerous by the anonymity of its sources. Concern for reputation is, in Criseyde's concern for her well-being, given a specific explanation. It is also a standard poetic trope with relevance to a contemporary audience. The poem itself is written for oral delivery, and even if this is just "the myth of delivery that Chaucer cultivates so assiduously in the poem",<sup>39</sup> the text is itself implicated in the telling of

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38 Phillip R. Schofield, "Peasants and the Manor Court: Gossip and Litigation in a Suffolk Village at the Close of the Thirteenth Century," *Past and Present* 159 (1998): 6.

39 Derek Pearsall, "The 'Troilus' Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 70.

stories and in the rumour and gossip about which Criseyde is justifiably concerned. Chaucer's depiction of Criseyde's character and the anxieties that shape her personality appears to reflect a consciousness of the sources of the poem, and its influence on Criseyde's literary reputation. The narrator brings our attention to this theme at the very beginning of the story:

And biddeth ek for hem that ben despeired

In love, that nevere nyl recovered be,

And ek for hem that falsly ben apeired

Thorough *wikked tonges*, be it he or she (*TC*, l. 36-39)[my italics]

Much of the tone of the first book (and more importantly, the second book) of *Troilus and Criseyde* is set by this remark – there is a paranoia in the story about reputation and gossip. The sources of this rumour and gossip are unknown, shapeless entities since they are described only as “*wikked tonges*”. The ethereal shapeless nature of gossip, brought to life in physical description in the *House of Fame* is again embodied in this text. This recurs throughout the poem: for Criseyde the enemy of social disgrace is more to be feared in its anonymity than the real physical enemies at the gates. It is also apparent in the poem that while all characters worry about reputation, it is primarily female reputation that is most at risk. The image of *wikked tonges* that threaten women recurs more than once in Book II:

“Also thise wokked tonges ben so prest

To spek us harm; ek men ben so untrewē,

That right anon as cessed is hire lest,



So cesseth love, and forth to love a newe.

.....

...And who may stoppen every wikked tonge,

Or sown of belles whil that thei ben ronge? (*TC*, II. 785-88; 805-6)

Gossip is described as being like bells ringing: the implication is that all will hear rumour quickly once it has begun. An aspect of the importance of discretion in love-affairs is hinted at in the above lines. Gossip is described as a risk parallel to the fickleness of male lovers. Consequently it is clear that the main reason for discretion in amorous encounters is that men cannot be trusted to maintain the relationship and so the likelihood of disgrace should the encounter become public is increased. One gets the impression that, were men more reliable, gossip might not be such a threat to women.

While gossip primarily threatens women, it impacts on men too. Other poets make note of the power of gossip, and in fact Lydgate uses the same image of the *wicked tunge*:

What-euer thow do, truste right welle this,-

A wicked tunge wille alwei sey amys... (*A Wicked Tunge Wille Sey*

*Amys*, 6-7)<sup>40</sup>

Lydgate's poem muses that even if one's behaviour is honourable, wicked people will gossip anyway. If you dress cheerfully, then people will say it is vanity, if your clothes are worn-out they will say it is laziness (*WT*, 8-12, 15-19). It is notable that while much of the advice given in this poem might easily apply to Criseyde, in fact it

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40 John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry N. MacCracken, EETS OS 107 (London: K. Paul, 1911) 839.

appears to be directed at a male audience. The features that Lydgate identifies as having the potential to be misconstrued are riches, sobriety, holiness, honesty and even marriage. In reference to marriage he notes that gossips will say that “wyves ben maistres” (*WT*, 33). He also catalogues noble men to show that even they may suffer from gossip:

And thowgh a man had[de] the prewesse  
Of worthi Ector, Troies champioun,  
The loue of Troylis, or the kyndnesse,  
Or of Cesar the famous high renoun,  
With al Alisaundres domynacioun,  
Yit for al that, trist[e] right wel this,

Somme wicked tonge wil sey of hym a-mys. (*A Wicked Tunge*, 92-98)

It is interesting that he mentions Troilus, for in Chaucer’s poem it is Criseyde who must be weary of gossip – Troilus seems less concerned. The poem goes on to catalogue the virtues of famous women including Penelope, Medea and Alceste. It speaks volumes of Criseyde’s reputation that while Lydgate defends the honour of Troilus, he does not extend the same courtesy to Criseyde. It seems that she is right to be concerned about the power of gossip, for even in this poem against gossip she is not defended. Lydgate closes the poem with the advice that it is best not to listen to gossips. In the case of Troilus and Criseyde, this probably would not be sufficient.

Pandarus, therefore, develops a different strategy in minimising the damage caused by gossip, and he advises Troilus of the proverb that “firste vertu is to kepe tonge”:

“And nere it that I wilne as now t'abregge  
 Diffusioun of speche, I koude almoost  
 A thousand olde stories the ellege  
 Of wommen lost through fals and foles bost.  
 Proverbes kanst thiself ynoew and woost  
 Ayeins that vice, for to ben a labbe,  
 Al seyde men soth as often as thei gabbe. (TC, III. 295-301)

Again the faceless threat of gossip is described in tongue imagery. And while tongues are presented as a threat to Criseyde, the poet sees a threat to his own work in their unreliability, leading to one of the most famous passages in the poem, when Chaucer prays that his text be copied faithfully. He is aware that his version of Criseyde's story will not be the last:

And for ther is gret diversite  
 In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
 So prey I God that non miswrite the,  
 Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;  
 And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
 That thow be understonde, God I biseche! (TC, V. 1793-96)

While the focus of worry has changed from Criseyde's reputation to the reliability of the text, *tonges* still represent an unseen danger – the body part stands in for the actions of others who we cannot know. While the *tonge* and *tonges* are to be found more than forty times in the *Canterbury Tales*, only in the *Manciple's Tale* is there another mention of *wikked tonges*. *The Parson's Tale* speaks of *double tonge*, but this

is to do with duplicity rather than gossip or rumour. In Chaucer's other poems the *tonge* usually refers to language or ways of speaking, not the unseen *wikked tonges* of Criseyde's awful fantasy. Thus, while *tonge* as language is a relatively benign word, *tonge* as body-part has negative implications. On the one hand it signals the persons attached to the tongues, who might do a reputation damage, but it is the physical tongue itself that comes to represent the dangers of anonymous gossip. The *tonge* is an apt metaphor for this threat. The danger of anonymous gossip is that an individual is not given the opportunity to defend him or herself, and of course the tongue cannot listen, it can only speak.

The heart has a common association both with love and with intention. In *Troilus and Criseyde* it seems to represent a vulnerable core in both of the lovers. Their hearts are frequently used to show the strong effects of their beloved upon them. When Troilus first sets eyes upon Criseyde Chaucer immediately mentions his heart:

Therwith his herte gan to spred and rise,  
 And softe sighed, lest men mygte hym here,  
 And caught ayeyn his firste pleyinge chere. (*TC*, I. 278-80)

It is clear that this physical reaction is one over which Troilus does not have complete control. He sighs softly so that he will not be heard, but he needs to sigh nonetheless. The image recurs again and again, with Troilus's "herte botme" (*TC*, I. 297 and *TC*, II. 535), the warmth and cold of his love-sick "herte" (*TC*, II. 698), and the "bloody teres that from his herte melte" (*TC*, III. 1445). Criseyde's heart becomes the central image of a disturbing dream, in which an eagle claws out her heart and

puts its own in its place (*TC*, II. 925); “And forth he fleigh, with herte left for herte” (*TC*, II. 931). She unfetters her heart in her letter to Troilus (*TC*, II. 1216), and she claims that she was “trewe and hool with al myn herte” (*TC*, III. 1001). Each seek ownership over each the other's heart; “And that youre herte al myn was” (*TC*, III. 1007). These are but a few of the references to hearts in the poem – there are many more. The use of the heart is significant not just because of its frequency but also because it is a site of anxiety about rational control over the body. As discussed, this was a serious concern and most descriptions of the heart in love emphasize the effect of the heart's love-sick reactions and the effects on human action and reason. Troilus's heart is at one point referred to as “his brestez ye” (*TC*, I. 453), an image that is recalled later in the description of the sun as the “hevenes ye” (*TC*, II. 904). Chaucer is using the heart to describe a certain essence, not so much a soul, but rather part of the character, which is focused on love and desire. This is by no means the whole person and the danger of love is that this part of the individual's personality can become dominant and in turn over-rule reason. The constant references to their hearts dissociate them, in a sense, from desires that are so central to their being – they both connect them to desire and love but also create the sense that such strong feelings are *imposed* on the characters by physical pressures on their *hertes*. By referring to their hearts' actions, rather than *their* actions Chaucer seems to remove some of the responsibility from them as complete beings – rather it is painfully apparent that they are subject to urges that effect their bodies, which they cannot control. Thus, just as the use of *tonges* anonymised rumour and gossip, so the use of *hertes* acts to create a sympathy in the audience for both Troilus

and Criseyde by linguistically shifting some of the responsibility for their actions on to the body parts that influence them – blame moves from them to their uncontrollable *hertes*. At the same time, however, the audience may blame the characters for allowing their hearts to dominate them, and this would certainly be the natural-philosophical response to their predicament. Whereas *hertes* and *tonges* represent something separable from their owners, eyes often signify intentionality. They occur almost exclusively in the context of phrases about glance and gesture. Troilus's desire for Criseyde is brought about by his sight:

And upon cas bifel that thorough a route  
His eye percede, and so depe it wente,  
Til on Criseyde it smot, and ther it stente. (*TC*, I. 271-3)

His eyes respond to the perfection of her body and to her femininity:

But alle hire lymes so wel answeynge  
Weren to wommanhod, that creature  
Was never lasse mannyssh in semynge. (*TC*, I. 282)

And it is through his eyes that a “fixe and depe impressioun” of her is left on his heart (*TC*, I. 297). Eyes are a pathway to the heart. Eyes are linked to esteem: “Ye stonden in hir eighen myghtily” (*TC*, I. 428). *Amor hereos* was understood to be an affliction brought on by the sight of a lover, and by his overestimation of her beauty. The importance of that to this discussion is that, as Wack notes, “No ethical valuation is attached to the causal mechanisms in any of the texts - the patient is not held “guilty” or “responsible” for his illness”.<sup>41</sup> This is significant because, while love

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41 Wack 1984, 56.

might be thought of as an abstract affair of the mind or soul, in medieval thought, and in *Troilus and Criseyde* in particular, falling in love is an affliction of the body for which the lover apparently bears no responsibility.<sup>42</sup>

It is the later experience of and reactions to love which one might be expected to control. Eyes are cast up or down; down for sadness and shyness, up when looking to the gods for answers. This gesture of looking up is to be found elsewhere in Chaucer, as in *The Book of the Duchess*:

With that her eyen up she casteth  
And saw noght. "Allas!" quod she for sorwe,  
And deyede within the thridde morwe. (*BD*, 212-14)

Unlike the heart and the tongue, however, the eyes are usually associated linguistically with their owners. Generally speaking in *Troilus and Criseyde*, as in the *Book of the Duchess*, they are referred to with an active verb (usually *cast*). The eyes represent the intentionality of the character, and the direction in which they cast their eyes tells us something of their inner state. Criseyde often modestly casts her eyes down (for example in II, 141 and 254), but so too does Troilus (as in II. 648). Both Troilus and Criseyde cast their eyes up to the gods in prayer, but Pandarus does so also:

Fil Pandarus on knees, and up his eyen  
To heven threw, and held his hondes highe. (*TC*, III. 183)

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of love-sickness as it relates to vision, see Corinne Saunders, "'The Thoughtful Maladie': Madness and Vision in Medieval Writing," *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, ed. Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 135-56.

These references to the eyes are not without significance, and their significance is not just gestural. They have a signification of their own and Chaucer draws attention to it when he has Troilus kiss Criseyde's *eyes*, and then most significantly refers to her face and her facial expression as a text that he has difficulty interpreting:

This Troilus ful ofte hire eyen two  
 Gan for to kisse, and seyde, "O eyen clere,  
 It weren ye that wroughte me swich wo,  
 Ye humble nettes of my lady deere!  
 Though ther be mercy writen in youre cheere,  
 God woot, the text ful hard is, soth, to fynde!  
 How koude ye withouten bond me bynde? (*TC*, III. 1352-58)

This reference to the face as a text is important for this reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*. I have referred to the eyes, the tongue, and the heart as units of signification, and the *significance* (in the semantic sense) of the body is made overt here by Chaucer. The way Chaucer uses the same turns of phrase consistently and with reference to the same meanings supports this suggestion. As we have seen, *tonges* are often *wikked*, *eyen* are often *cast*. It suggests that when Chaucer uses these words and phrases, he intends to direct the audience to other moments of bodily significance; to other moments in the text. The words of Troilus and of Criseyde hold important significance for each other but so too do their body parts and body signals. Witness the description of Troilus's process of memory, in which "Hire wordes alle, *and every countenance*, / And fermely impressen in his mynde" (*TC*, III. 1542) [my italics]. This makes it clear that characters remember each



other's actions not just in terms of the words they use or the physical actions they perform, but also in terms of *countenance*. Physical disposition and appearance are as important to perceptions of personality as words.

As mentioned, love-sickness, or *amor hereos*, plays a central part in the portrayal of the body in *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>43</sup> With regard to Troilus in particular, love is explained in physical terms, in terms that were very well known, and found as common tropes in most love poetry from the twelfth century onwards. The archetypal texts for this discourse of love are Ovid's writing and the *Roman de la Rose*. Wack notes that literary and medieval "codes" of love "overlap", but argues that there is "a particular constellation of attitudes toward passionate love that seem to be distinctively medical", which Chaucer "manipulates precisely for its contrast to other forms of discourse on love which he uses in the poem".<sup>44</sup> Troilus's physical response to love is typical of this tradition, and it is typical in its very physicality. Chaucer fulfills the expectations of this tradition very early on by having Troilus sigh and groan from lovesickness early in Book I:

And whan that hein chambre was allone,  
 He doun upon his beddes feet hym sette,  
 And first he gan to sike, and eft to grone,  
 And thought ay on hire so, withouten lette,  
 That, as he sat and wook, his spirit mette

43 John Livingston Lowes, "The Loveres Maladye of Hereos," *Modern Philology* 11.4 (1914): 491-546.

44 Mary F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1990) 55. The medical texts which Wack considers most important are the *Viaticum* of Constantinus Africanus (with which "every university-trained physician would have been familiar"), a gloss on the *Viaticum* by Gerardus Bituricensis, and Avicenna's *Canon Medicinæ*. This tradition was also popularised by medical reference books known as *concordantie*. Wack's discussion of the many glosses on the *Viaticum* is informative.

That he hire saugh a-temple, and al the wise

Right of hire look, and gan it newe avise. (*TC*, I. 358-64)

This is followed by the *Canticus Troili*, a powerful description of the effects of love from Troilus's own perspective: the hot and cold, the sweet pain, all common tropes made fresh in this passage. The *disease* of love is overtly associated with medical, physical cures, despite the fact that it is made clear that the beloved's mercy and love are the only cure:

For whoso list have helyng of his leche,

To hym byhoveth first unwre his wounde. (*TC*, I. 857-8)

But, for Troilus, Criseyde is both the physician and the cause of his wounds:

For certes, lord, so soore hath she me wounded,

That stod in blak, with lokyng of hire eyen,

That to myn hertes botme it is ysounded. (*TC*, II. 533-35)

Furthermore, she too becomes the patient, and suffers the same hot and cold of love-sickness (*TC*, II, 698). No doubt, the hot and cold, the very *illness*, are good metaphors for the instability of their emotions, but the overall metaphor is borrowed from a tradition in which the allegory is more stable, which usually focuses on the male protagonist. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, the love-sickness discourse is ever-present but very inconsistent. Rather, there is a consistency to the language of the body used, and while it is influenced by the allegorical tradition (and from texts like the *Roman de la Rose*), what we have in *Troilus and Criseyde* is not allegory, but a system of body symbolism.

Chaucer draws attention to the physicality of Troilus and Criseyde's love, and the text frequently draws attention to the physical nature of love-relationships. Criseyde worries about her independence: "I am myn owene womman, wel at ese". She owns her own body. This ownership over her own body (and her need to protect it from attack) is stressed from the very beginning of the poem. Hector takes pity on Criseyde following her father's shameful betrayal of Troy and offers her his protection:

And seyde, "Lat youre fadres treson gon  
 Forth with meschaunce, and ye youreself in joie  
 Dwelleth with us, whil yow good list, in Troie.  
 And al th'onour that men may don yow have,  
 As ferforth as youre fader dwelled here,  
 Ye shul have, *and youre body shal men save,*  
 As fer as I may ought enquire or here." (TC, I. 117-23) [my italics]

Thus what is at stake for Criseyde in this poem, her body and her freedom, is made apparent from the start. We must remember that Calcas was considered (with all his kin), to be "worthi for to brenne, fel and bones" (TC, I. 90-91). The threat to him and to his daughter is physical. The language of the poem, which focuses on body parts and power over the body, draws attention to the physicality of love and to the power relations implicated in love. In the end, it is Troilus's body that must suffer in death in battle. Strangely, now liberated from the story, and apparently liberated from his love for Criseyde and all earthly concerns, Troilus is no longer described in

bodily, physical terms (in fact he leaves every element!). Rather, he is described in ethereal terms, with mention of *goost* and *hevene*:

And whan that he was slayn in this manere,  
 His lighte goot ful blisfully is went  
 Up to the holughnesse of the eighte spere,  
 In convers letyng everich element;  
 And ther he saugh with ful avysement  
 The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye  
 With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie.

And down from thennes fast he gan avyse  
 This litel spot of erthe that with the se  
 Embraced is, and fully gan despise  
 This wrecched world, and held al vanite  
 To respect of the pleyn felicite  
 That is in hevene above; and at the laste,  
 Ther he was slayn his lokyng down he caste. (*TC*, V. 1807-20)

Note the echoes of the *eyen casteth* in the final line, yet now there is no mention of body parts – just *lokyng*, the act of sight. *Troilus and Criseyde* draws our attention to the physicality of earthly concerns like love and war, but gives us a sense of distance from our own bodies that uncomfortably shifts responsibility away from the individual, and encourages sympathy for the protagonists' sense of lack of control over events.

In this chapter Chaucer's poetry has been shown to reflect both his diversity as an author and his ongoing interest in the relationship between the body and the authoritative discourses that seek to regulate it. The poems examined highlight the fallibility of authoritative discourses. The multiplicity of views presented in his poetry means that it is hard to assign any particular perspective to the poet himself. One can conclude that he is aware of the ways in which the body is socially controlled, and especially how it is controlled by language. Both the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* demonstrate the truth of the Foucauldian notion that power acts upon the bodies of its subjects. The *Pardoner's Tale* and the *Summoner's Tale* demonstrate the ways in which authoritative discourse might be manipulated by a cynical speaker, but they also show the complicated bias created by speakers' bodies as well as their language. They tend to demonstrate the medieval association between morality and physicality and in this respect Chaucer reinforces social norms. Chaucer is able to create so many different voices because of the form of his poetry. The frame of the *Canterbury Tales* lends itself especially well to a curious poet who wishes to explore different points of view. The next poets to be examined differ in that their viewpoints tend to be more consistent across their poetry. Both are strongly influenced by Chaucer, and whereas Chaucer's poetry highlights the ways in which speakers reflect their attitudes towards bodies, Henryson and Dunbar demonstrate two alternative approaches to the language of the body. In chapter five Dunbar will be shown to use similar techniques to Chaucer in looking at the body, but his innovation is to look at rather different bodies to those considered by Chaucer, and to offer an unusual representation of female attitudes towards male

bodies. His poetry will also demonstrate a concern for the usefulness of bodies, whether sexual or otherwise, a perspective inspired by Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. In the chapter to follow, however, Henryson's moral approach to the body will be outlined. He, too, is heavily indebted to Chaucer, but his approach is to extend the moral judgement hinted at in *Troilus and Criseyde* and to imagine how such judgement might be acted out upon Criseyde's body.

## Chapter 4: Watching the Body Decay in Henryson's Poetry

Not all looking, even by men, is of the same kind...<sup>1</sup>

The last chapter examined the diverse ways in which Chaucer spoke of the body. It described his characters' multiple perspectives and showed that Chaucer undermined the truth-value of authoritative discourses. This chapter will consider Robert Henryson's approach to the language of the body. Despite the many similarities in their cultural inheritance and the direct influence of Chaucer's poetry on Henryson, he differs from his English predecessor in that he primarily speaks of bodies from a moral perspective that is matched in some, but not all, of Chaucer's works. In Chaucer's poetry the audience's attention is drawn to the attitudes of his narrators and tellers towards the body. Audience interpretation of his poetry is influenced by its reading of the tale-tellers themselves. In Henryson's poetry, however, the narrator is not overtly constructed as a fictional character and so the audience is more likely to associate the opinions of the narrator with the opinions of the poet himself. In Chaucer's case this is only likely in the short poems. While one cannot be certain that Henryson's narrators do indeed speak in his own voice, the moral perspective of his poetry is more consistent, even where it surprises, than that found in Chaucer's writing. Henryson's construction of the narrator is less complex than that of Chaucer. Chaucer's influence on Henryson, then, appears to be in the association between the body and morality, but Henryson's interpretation of this perspective is communicated in a more singular voice. *The*

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1    Spearing 1993, 24.

*Resoning betwix Deth and Man* is a relatively straightforward *memento mori* poem and it communicates the orthodox view that one's physical life is less important than the afterlife to come. This view is repeated in a more striking fashion in *The Thre Deid Pollis*, discussed later in this chapter. *The Praise of Age* makes more or less the same point, demonstrating that one's gradual movement away from earthly concerns in old age is, in fact, an opportunity provided by God to mend one's ways and focus on the eternal life to come. This narrator's mistrust of earthly pleasures is made clear:

'Suld no man traist this wrechit warld, for quhy  
 Of erdly joy ay sorow is the end.  
 The state of it can no man certify:  
 This day a king, to morne na gude to spend.  
 Quhat have we here bot grace us to defend?  
 The quhilk God grant us, for to mend oure mys,  
 That to his glore he may oure saulis send:  
 The more of age, the nerar hevynnis blisse.' (25-32)

While his narrators may tend to speak from a single moral perspective, alternative attitudes to the body are portrayed in his characters' voices. Henryson peoples his poetry with individual perspectives on the body, but these are not the perspectives of the narrator. Like Chaucer, he was able to imagine multiple perspectives, but in most of the poems examined here the views of the narrators tend to be internally consistent. (The views expressed in the *moralitates* of his *Fables*, however, are often surprising. These sometimes provide an interpretation of their fable's events that do not match an audience's



likely expectations; *The Cock and the Jasp* is a good example of this.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless Henryson also chooses for some of his fables, from the many moral interpretations available, *moralitates* that do fit with his audience's probable expectations.) Like Chaucer, Henryson draws our attention to the bodies of many of the characters in his stories. While Chaucer offers perspectives on both male and female bodies, it is noteworthy that the narratorial gaze in Henryson's poetry is almost always directed toward women. Again this does not imply that Henryson avoids imagining the female voice. Henryson's narrators often invite the audience to share their gaze, but they also allow access to female characters' attitudes towards their own bodies. The audience is encouraged to examine the ways in which bodies are perceived by the characters to whom they belong, by other characters in the same work, and by the audience itself. The poem's most authoritative voice, however, remains that of the narrator. His glimpses of characters' own perspectives may create empathy for them in the audience, but this is always tempered by the final judgement of the narrator himself.

Whereas the poetry of both Chaucer and Dunbar is frequently interpreted in light of the relatively full historical context that is available, Henryson's poetry is not open to interpretation in the same manner. This is primarily because firm knowledge of the facts of Henryson's life is very limited. Most critics point to some short lines in Dunbar's *I that in Heill Wes and Gladnes* as the only firm evidence of Henryson's location and approximate years of death:

In Dunfermelyne he [Death] has done rounne

With maister Robert Henrisoun. ( 81-2)

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<sup>2</sup> Tasioulas argues that "surprise may have been Henryson's intention, forcing the complacent reader to recognise wisdom when he sees it in the bird-brained cock". Tasioulas 694.

These lines appear to support the reports in early printed editions of Henryson's work that he was a schoolmaster in Dunfermline.<sup>3</sup> This evidence points to the assumption that Henryson was dead before 1505, the likely date of composition of *I that in Heill Wes and Gladnes*. It is assumed that his poems were composed in the latter half of the fifteenth century. It is safe to say that while there are other possible contemporary references to the poet and that a fuller account of his life can be attempted based on supposition, any more detailed picture of Henryson is based on guesswork and on hints from his poetry. Because of statements in his poetry it can be said with confidence that he was familiar with the courts, the church, and political life. His poetry brings together classical learning with a descriptive style heavily influenced by his rootedness in Scottish life. Tasioulas notes that "there is erudition even in the obscenity and touching humanity in the portrayal of classical figures who remain static and distant in so much medieval poetry".<sup>4</sup> If the *Knight's Tale* is a classical tale in medieval dress, Henryson's poetry tells continental stories transposed to an apparently Scottish milieu. His poetry is both cruelly graphic, morally judgemental, and yet compassionate in tone. In so much of his poetry bodies play an important role in reflecting the pain and suffering of his characters, but also in describing their apparent punishment. Bodies offer a channel for audience sympathy while at the same time reinforcing the moral judgement imposed by the narrator.

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3 Tasioulas 2.

4 Ibid 4.

*Henryson's Gaze: a Religious Example*

The male gaze and many of the issues associated with it have been discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Drawing on the studies of Mulvey and Spearing, two types of male gaze were identified in medieval literature, the gaze of ownership or dominance, and the gaze of longing. I noted that a third type of gaze would be considered: the gaze of disgust and the anti-gaze, or aversion of the eyes, associated with it. This analysis will commence, however, with the poem in Henryson's canon that best supports Mulvey's understanding of the male gaze. In this poem the gaze represents a type of longing although any sexualized longing is veiled behind the language of religion. The poem is representative of the tradition of Marian poetry on which medieval poets frequently drew. The readings to follow in this chapter will show that this traditional approach is the exception rather than the rule and that Henryson is, in fact, rather innovative. *The Annunciation* remains of interest, however, because it demonstrates Henryson's capacity to write in a traditional mode. It also illustrates the kinds of attitudes towards the body upon which he builds in his secular poetry and in particular the common cultural association between physical purity and the purity of the soul. This mirrors the association between physical appearance and moral behaviour in Chaucer's poetry. If a single narratorial voice can be identified across the canon of Henryson's work, then this poem establishes the moral conformity of that voice. It also shows that, like Chaucer, Henryson tends to associate bodily perfection with moral virtue. In *The Annunciation* the divine body of the mother of Christ is glorified as an example of purity and grace. Henryson magnifies the purity of *myld Mary* for his audience,

simultaneously bringing it into proximity with her physicality and her divine nature. At one level the Blessed Virgin is ethereal. She is beyond reach by nature of her association with God. At another this poem represents her divinity by reference to her human body. It describes her divinity in physical terms and makes it abundantly clear that she is a woman rather than an angel. Charles Hallett notes that the poem can seem almost too simple for interpretation: its purpose “appears to be simply to celebrate the mystery that rendered Mary at once ‘moder and madyn’”.<sup>5</sup> One might suggest that the physicality of the poem is a product of this glorification of Mary as a mother. Her maternal capacity could hardly be celebrated without a celebration of her flesh. The poem owes much to the English religious lyric genre.<sup>6</sup> It glorifies both Mary’s physical and spiritual purity and wholeness, signifying her readiness to receive God’s miracle.

The poem draws on the traditional imagery associated with the Immaculate Conception: the rod of Aaron, Moses’ burning bush and Gideon’s Fleece.<sup>7</sup> Hallett notes that the poem simultaneously glorifies God and examines “through the poetic medium the very nature of divine love”.<sup>8</sup> The poem emphasises the superiority of divine love over human love yet it borrows from the language of secular love poetry to hint at Mary’s divine nature. The opening lines deliberately echo secular love poetry and recall the language of love-sickness: “No thing is hard, as writ can pruf,/ Till him in lufe that letis” (*Annunciation*, 3-4). These lines allow for two readings. Normally *writ* is glossed as scripture and so one might then read this as a sympathetic description of God’s unconditional love for man. The poem will go on to remind us of God’s

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5 Charles A. Hallett, "Theme and Structure in Henryson's 'The Annunciation'," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 10 (1973): 165.

6 Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

7 Tasioulas 721.

8 Hallett 165.

deliberate sacrifice of his own free will in the example of Jesus and that lends support to this interpretation. From this perspective God's love is shown to be a far-amplified version of the histrionic romantic love described by medieval love poets. If one applies the less likely reading of *writ* as being all of written tradition one can find in these lines the love-sick lover of courtly love-poetry. The comparison is hard to avoid even if the audience takes the first reading to be more appropriate. The analogy between God's love for humanity and the suffering of a lover has precedent in scripture itself, in the *Song of Songs*, although this was heavily glossed in the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> The words used to describe Mary's perfection are contextually implicated in the secular poetic tradition. In Henryson's lines we hear echoes of a poetic tradition that is by no means focused on love for the divine. The description of Mary's beauty recalls poetic descriptions of beautiful beloved subjects:

O lady lele and lusumest,  
 Thy face moist fair and schene is;  
 O blosum blith and bowsumest,  
 Fra carnale cryme that clene is... (*The Annunciation* 61-64)

This expression of Marian devotion echoes the language of romantic love and only the last line serves to specify the speaker's intended devotee. It clearly signals, however, that this is not a secular love poem. The hyperbolic language of medieval love poetry is not far removed from the hyperbole of prayer. Compare, for example, with a rare love ballad from Chaucer:

Madame, ye ben of al beaute shryne  
 As fer as cercled is the mapamounde,

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9 Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990).

For as the cristal glorious ye shyne,

And lyke ruby ben your chekes rounde.. (*To Rosemounde*, 1-5)

The primary difference between Chaucer's love poem and Henryson's Marian devotion is that in Chaucer's case the lady is not described as being free from carnality. Mary is like a beautiful woman of love poetry, except that while the women of love poetry are merely quasi-unobtainable, Mary is genuinely unobtainable. If God's love is like a supreme version of secular love, then the mother of his child is like a supreme version of all women. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is largely based on the conventions of secular art such as those evident in the ballad above. The male gaze is, indeed, most clearly evident in the medieval period in men's descriptions of women. The *Roman de la Rose* is the archetypal example of this phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Critical readings of medieval love poetry have, in turn, been greatly influenced by twentieth-century ideas about the male gaze. From a critical perspective medieval love poetry appears to offer a fruitful body of work in which one can unproblematically see the gaze of the male audience and the protagonist focused on the objectified female.<sup>11</sup> In this context the gaze is one of power and love or perhaps, as Spearing argues, one of longing. It is certainly not a gaze of disgust. I will show in this chapter, however, that it is the gaze of disgust that dominates Henryson's poetry.

Henryson does not break with tradition in his description of the Annunciation. It would be a mistake to ignore I. W. A. Jamieson's astute observation that "the characteristics of what are called Henryson's minor poems are dependent, largely, on their generical antecedents, not any factor of

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10 Guillaume De Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994).

11 See Sarah Stanbury for a reading of Griselda's body which fits into this critical tradition. On the other hand she, too, sees gaze theory as problematic for medieval literature.

personality...".<sup>12</sup> This is especially true for a poem with such a traditional subject. Henryson's *Annunciation* also has probable Latin antecedents. The *Angelus ad virginem* that Nicholas sings in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* illustrates the popularity of such lyrics.<sup>13</sup> The ideas about the body demonstrated in *The Annunciation* are not confined to this poem, however. In fact Henryson consistently associates the physical body with moral condition. Whereas Chaucer sometimes highlighted the disparity between appearance and inner character, Henryson consistently expects his audience to judge his characters' moral status based on the physical condition in which he presents them. What is interesting is not just Henryson's own method but his expectations of his audience's response. In *The Annunciation* it is not surprising that Henryson expects his audience to consider Mary's perfect body as evidence for her spiritual purity since this is typical of the Marian tradition, yet it also illustrates an approach that Henryson consistently maintains. It shows that, like Chaucer, he relied on his audience to make associations between the body and moral status. This analysis focuses on Henryson's practice as a writer but he himself relied on his audience's practice as a group of listeners. Without an understanding of their expectations he could not create poetry in which perception is of such central importance. His poetry displays an understanding of how an audience might perceive the bodies of his characters. In *The Annunciation* Henryson can only describe Mary's perfection through negation since the poetic language of human physical love is imperfect in itself. There is no vocabulary available which does not draw on secular body imagery and images of physical beauty.

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12 I.W.A. Jamieson, "The Minor Poems of Robert Henryson," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 9 (1971-72): 126.

13 Robert Henryson, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) 426.

While critics have tended to portray *The Annunciation* as a simple poem it has more depth than is generally attributed to it. The poem opens, for example, with a profound statement that speaks of the power of both divine love and human physical love. Henryson's understanding of love is, without doubt, influenced by that of Augustine, who made explicit the distinction between love and lust:

Caritatem voco motum animi ad fruendum deo propter ipsum et se  
atque proximo propter deum; cupiditatem autem motum animi ad  
fruendum se et proximo et quolibet corpore non propter deum.<sup>14</sup>

Here Augustine echoes the view of love found in Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Earthly love is but a poor reflection of divine love. This was a view that was almost universal among medieval scholars, and yet medieval love poetry remained very popular nonetheless. Such echoes are not confined to Henryson. One of Dunbar's short poems, for examples, despairs at the instability of the world:

I seik aboute this warld onstable  
To find a sentence conveniable,  
Bot I can not in all my witt  
Sa trew a sentence find of it,  
As say it is dissavable. (*I Seik Aboute this Warld Onstable* 1-5)

Despite their differences, Dunbar and Henryson both tend to offer an orthodox Christian perspective. In *The Annunciation* divine love and earthly lust are implicitly contrasted:

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<sup>14</sup> "By love I mean the impulse of one's mind to enjoy God on his own account and to enjoy oneself and one's neighbour on account of God; and by lust I mean the impulse of one's mind to enjoy oneself and one's neighbour and any corporeal thing not on account of God." Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 3.10.16.



Forcy as deith is likand lufe,  
 Throuch quhom al bittir swet is;  
 No thing is hard, as writ can pruf,  
 Till him in lufe that letis;  
 Luf us fra barret betis. (*The Annunciation*, 1-5)

Fox notes that this image is taken directly from the influential *Song of Songs*:

pone me ut signaculum super cor tuum ut signaculum super  
 brachium tuum quia fortis est ut mors dilectio dura sicut inferus  
 aemulatio lampades eius lampades ignis atque flammaram. (*Song  
 of Songs*, 8:6)<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned *The Song of Songs* is, itself, a poem with a complex relationship to perceptions of the body. Its sensual content was veiled in medieval exegesis and as a result it was usually read not as a celebration of the human body but as a metaphor for Christ's relationship with his Church.<sup>16</sup> Henryson's use of the *Song of Songs* in his own physical, and yet unphysical, poem indicates either that he shared in the project of exegesis in removing the physical from descriptions of the divine or that he understood the complexities of the *Song of Songs* and its reception in the Middle Ages. Fox notes that the same image was often used in religious lyrics, and can also be found in Douglas' *Aeneid*:

Thow plenest paradise, and thow heriet hell...  
 Quhat! Wilt thow als debating euermair

15 "Put me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy as hard as hell, the lamps thereof are fire and flames."

16 For a comprehensive discussion of the *Song of Songs* and medieval exegesis see Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis and the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies Series 156 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1995).

Agane this likand luif, cumis of plesance? (*Aeneid* IV Prol. 41-2, IV i. 78-79).<sup>17</sup>

*The Song of Songs* influenced *The Romance of the Rose* and consequently Chaucer and many others. The focus here is on the real power of love and in the context of this poem this is the divine power of grace (Gabriel's *message mervale*) which is a force for good. Love relieves us from distress: "Luf ws fra barret betis". In two of Henryson's longer poems, however, the *Testament of Cresseid* and *Orpheus and Eurydice*, the power of lust is shown to have negative effects on the protagonists. These stories share the moral perspective of *The Annunciation* but tell of moral failures rather than providing an example of ideal feminine morality.

*The Annunciation*, then, differs from Henryson's other poems in that he tries to show the positive power of love or grace as it reflects divine intention. Henryson's most powerful metaphor for the force of love in human affairs, both positive and negative, is in its visible physical effects on his protagonists.<sup>18</sup> Physical effects that are not visible are of less use to him. He does not describe changes to the body in terms of how they are felt by the person concerned. While Chaucer is interested in the experiences of his characters, Henryson's approach is more didactic. The body, for Henryson, is the body as it is visually perceived by others and by the self. This is a technique that he finds in other authors, for example in some of Chaucer's work, but Henryson attempts a more complete exposition of the approach. Furthermore, he rarely describes the body in alternative terms. His poetry illustrates the force of love – when negative it is akin to death. Indeed for both *Cresseid* and *Eurydice* love actually results in

17 Gavin Douglas, *The Poetical Works*, ed. John Small, (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1970).

18 Joanna Martin, *Kingship and Love in Scottish Poetry 1424-1540* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). She discusses the "centrality of amorousness to the projects of Older Scots poets, suggesting that the discussion of love is fundamental to the advisory and ethical nature of much of the verse writing of this period...". Her focus is on love as it affects the male protagonists. This study will pay more attention to the effect of love on the bodies of female protagonists.

death. It might suggest something of Henryson's attitude to love that he wrote two longer poems on the negative outcomes of lust but only shorter poems on the positive effects of love. Henryson's image of love as having both negative and positive aspects is particularly black and white. Many lyrics in the English tradition show a bipolar image of love and this is often seen as Petrarchan. Such love-lyrics tend to demonstrate the bitter-sweet nature of secular love, however:

Love is wele, love is wo, love is gleddede;

Love is lif, love is deth, love may us fede. (Bodl. 21956, c.1390)<sup>19</sup>

The imagined association between death and love is also not uncommon:

My deth I love, my lif ich hate,

For a levedy shene;

Heo is bright so dayes light

That is on me well sene. (B.M. Harley 2253, Early 14<sup>th</sup> Century)<sup>20</sup>

This lyric demonstrates the same paradoxical approach to love, a view from which secular love was both positive and negative. Henryson's approach was more clear about the damaging aspects of secular love. Some lyrics agree with him, such as this standard complaint about the cruelty of *cupiditas*:

Pite, that I have sought so yore agoo,

With herte soore, and ful of besy peyne,

That in this world was never wight so woo

Withoute deth, - and, yf I shal not feyne,

My purpos was to Pite to compleyne

Upon the crueltee and tyrannye

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19 Luria and Hoffmann no. 21.

20 Luria and Hoffmann no. 34.

Of Love, that for my trouthe doth me dye. (Bodl. 3896, Late 14<sup>th</sup>  
cent.)<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the best exposition, amongst the short lyrics, of the differences between human love and divine love is below:

All other love is like the mone  
That wext and wanet as flowre in plein,  
As flowre that fairet and fawet sone,  
As day that scowret and endet in rein.

All other love bigint by blisse,  
In wep and wo mak his ending;  
No love her nis that our all lisse,

Bot what areste in hevene king. (Eton College MS 36, Part II)<sup>22</sup>

This poem insists on the eternal nature of divine love and in doing so it highlights the temporal failures of human love and its associated tragedies.

Attitudes to love in medieval poetry were varied, but on the spectrum of approaches to the subject Henryson was firmly in the religious camp.

### *Henryson's Bodies: Sight without Feeling*

There is a significant difference between Henryson and other poets like Chaucer, or indeed Dunbar, in the ways in which the body is used to indicate the effects of love on the individual. In Henryson's poetry the audience hears little of how it *feels* to inhabit the body of the lover or the beloved. His characters' own

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21 Luria and Hoffmann no. 44.

22 Luria and Hoffmann no. 7.

experience of the body and their perspective on events is described in a limited fashion. His narrators have as little access to the internal psychology of the poem's characters as the audience. Rather, they tell the audience what they observe. In Henryson's writing we are invited to *see* what happens to those in love or to those who have sinned. One struggles to find descriptions of emotional feeling in his work. Where Chaucer tells the audience how his characters feel, Henryson describes their physical reactions to emotion as perceived by other characters, or more frequently, by the narrator. Contrast this with the lyric poems above in which the feelings described are the reference point for our understanding of the affected body, or indeed with Chaucer, for whom the physical feelings of a character are shorthand for their emotional state. A good example of this in Chaucer's poetry is Troilus and his love-longing, which manifests itself in physical love-sickness and is summed up in the *Canticus Troili* (*Troilus and Criseyde*, I. 400-420).<sup>23</sup> Chaucer's narrators are granted access to his characters' psychological processes in a way that Henryson's are not. Orpheus' sadness in Henryson's account of the story is to be inferred from his tears of blood rather than from any narratorial description of his emotional state. In *The Annunciation* there are six stanzas in which Mary's perfection, both physical and spiritual, is expounded. The emphasis throughout the poem is on the superlative goodness and wholeness of the Virgin Mary: "O worthy wirschip singuler" (30), "O lady lele and lusumest" (61), "O blosom blith and bowsumest" (63). Her perfect nature is repeatedly emphasised through the imagery of wholeness and cleanliness. Moral perfection is described in terms of physical characteristics. Wholeness and cleanliness are illustrated by the absence of sin and of physical

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23 Apart from classical antecedents, the main cultural sources of love-sickness imagery are the French troubadour poems. For a comprehensive study of love-sickness see Wack 1990.

damage or penetration. She is, for example, “fra carnal cryme... clene” (64). Henryson can only adequately describe the purity of Mary’s body by telling us that which she is not. Describing Mary’s perfection is akin to attempts to describe God. Henryson’s method of praising Mary indicated, however, that he assumed bodies to be corrupt under normal circumstances. Her uncorrupted body is remarkable. Mary’s lack of sin is best represented for him by a body that the audience perceives as lacking any corruption or fault.

Just as Mary’s physical perfection is a sign of her moral perfection, in Henryson’s poetry moral disintegration is associated with physical disintegration. This is a feature of his moral framework that he shares with other writers. From a critical perspective it would make sense if women’s bodies were described in terms of appearances but men’s bodies were described in terms of how the characters themselves feel. In this scenario the male audience (or at least an audience that shares the narrator’s male perspective) could feel men’s bodies but would only be able to see women’s bodies. The audience, therefore, would share the perspective of the male characters but would always gaze at the female characters rather than sharing in their emotional reaction to events. John Berger neatly summarizes the basis of such a reading:

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being watched. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women

in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.<sup>24</sup>

This corresponds with the theoretical paradigm suggested by Mulvey in which women's bodies function as objects for male projections of power fantasies. Unfortunately this model does not entirely hold up to scrutiny when applied to Henryson. As mentioned above, men are not described in terms of how their bodies feel in Henryson's poetry because, in fact, nobody is described in such terms. The audience is given no more opportunity to share in men's thoughts than they are in women's. On the other hand, a curious difference in Henryson's treatment of men and women is that, in general, men's bodies receive far less attention than women's bodies. Whereas in the work of other poets the love-sickness of the male protagonist is often the centre of attention, in Henryson's writing this is rarely the case. An important exception to this in Henryson's poetry is the case of Orpheus and his tears of blood. Even in this instance, however, Henryson does not borrow from the standard language of the physical effects of male love-sickness. While it makes sense that Henryson would borrow Ovid's imagery, it is somewhat surprising that he did not use the standard language of love-sickness in a story that is concerned with the opposition between the physical and intellectual appetites. When male bodies are mentioned they are also described in terms of the way those bodies are perceived. One very curious example of this, to be described later in this chapter, is the narrator's reference to his own body in *The Testament of Cresseid*.

*The Annunciation* is a poem in which this principle, that moral disintegration is associated with physical disintegration or that the moral

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24 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC/Penguin, 1972) 47.

becomes evident on the body, is demonstrated inversely: “myld Mary” is shown to be pure through her intact virginity. Her perfection is a matter of physical completion rather than beauty: it matters that Mary is whole, not that she is physically attractive. Mary is undefiled but her purity is juxtaposed with the penetrative language of death and *cupiditas*; “Forcy as deith is likand lufe,/ Throuh quhom al bittir suet is” (*Annun.*, 1-2). Her virginity is explicitly described in physical terms and in terms, furthermore, of wounding and breaking:

The angell it expoundis,  
How that hir wame but woundis  
Consave it suld, fra syn exild. (*Annun.*, 16-18)

Mary’s virginity is described as a state of physical completeness; she is without wounds (either from sex or from child-birth). John Stephens notes the uncomfortable physicality of the poem’s imagery and the holistic implications of its use:

The implications of ‘woundis’ are perhaps distasteful to many modern readers, though this no doubt is to import an attitude foreign to the poem’s ethos. Behind the word is the concept of chastity as totality, and so in Henryson’s use of it here it neatly conveys the dual notion of conception without actual physical change and without sin.<sup>25</sup>

The language emphasises the fallen nature of human sexuality and sets it in opposition to the divinity of the Immaculate Conception. As noted in chapter two, female sexuality was associated with moral weakness in the medieval

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25 John Stephens, “Devotion and Wit in Henryson’s *The Annunciation*,” *English Studies* 50 (1970): 327.



imagination. In her asexuality, then, Mary represents femininity without failure. She manages the impossible task of attaining motherhood without being tainted by the act of procreation. The emphasis remains on completeness as her divine motherhood is described: “O worthy wirschip *singular*” (*Annun.*, 30) [my italics]. Hallet neatly describes the core argument of the first three stanzas:

The revelation is structured so that the reader will be continually aware of the contrast between human love, which even when sanctified by marriage is ultimately expressed through carnality, and divine love, which because of its perfection can pierce innocence without wounding, without beguiling, without staining.<sup>26</sup>

The association between sin and physical condition is again emphasised in the last stanza: Mary is *clene* from *carnale cryme* (*Annun.*, 64). An interesting feature of the discourse of this poem is the association between the carnal crime and the body of the woman. Since carnality would wound her, the crime of sex is portrayed as one that is acted out on the woman’s body rather than committed by the woman herself. Indeed the image of female cleanliness implies that women are sullied by sexual activity rather than being intrinsically corrupt before sex. Despite the implications of such language Henryson is inconsistent in his attitude and in other poems it seems that carnality is a sin of female action rather than simply of female acceptance. In *The Annunciation* the audience is introduced to the notion that spiritual morality is associated with physical condition. It is a poem to which male gaze theory can be applied. It does not represent a strong challenge to understandings of gender relations in art nor to

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26 Hallett 167.

common expectations of the male gaze of the narrator since it is one for which a perfectly acceptable reading of the poem might be based solely on Mulvey's arguments outlined earlier. Henryson's other poetry is more challenging, however, and while the critical tools provided by Berger, Mulvey and their followers remain useful, problems related to issues of perception arise. What is not clear from *The Annunciation* is the extent to which perception is intrinsic to Henryson's portrayal of bodies. A much better example of a short poem in which the body is experienced as a thing to be beheld is *The Thre Deid Pollis*.

### *Warnings of Death*

In *The Thre Deid Pollis* the association between physical disintegration and moral corruption is taken to its logical extremity: the dead themselves warn of their fates and the fate that awaits any who sin. Dunbar expresses this view succinctly in *Quhat is this Lyfe Bot ane Straucht Way to Deid* but in Henryson's poem the warning is dramatized. Dunbar offers another warning in *O Synfull Man, thir ar the Fourty Dayis*. Henryson's poem is of principal importance, in this analysis, because the *pollis* provide their own visual appearance as evidence for the veracity of their argument. Their purpose is to disgust and educate rather than to amuse and educate. This is a very visual poem – we are invited to see Henryson's descriptions, not to smell, touch or hear them. They expect the audience to pay attention because of their deathly appearance. The *pollis'* macabre warning is striking and unsettling:

...With gaistly sicht behold oure heidis thre,  
Oure holkit ene, oure peilit pollis bair.

As ye ar now, in to this world we wair... (*The Thre Deid Pollis*, 3-5)

The force of the argument lies in the insistence that the audience *look* at the three empty skulls. This is an unusual demand. The argument might be made that a medieval audience would have been more familiar with the bodies of the dead than many modern audiences, and indeed contact with the dead bodies of loved ones is more common today in some cultures than in others. It is also true, however, that a common reaction to death is to avert one's gaze. In this poem the audience's gaze is fixed uncomfortably on the three dead skulls and consequently on their own mortality. While the male gaze is typically fixed on the object of desire (normally the female body), in this instance the *pollis* insist that it must remain fixed upon them. They manipulate the audience's gaze and repurpose it to new ends. In chapter two it was argued that the notion of the gaze must be extended to accommodate the greater range of ways of looking that one finds in medieval poetry. Here we see that the gaze cannot be interpreted in the normal way because the relationship between observer and observed has been turned on its head. Berger notes, in very general terms, the passivity of the object in many oil-paintings. In many descriptions of female bodies in literature and indeed in Henryson's writing such passivity is also to be found. But here, the *holkit ene* of the *pollis* stare back at the audience threateningly. The audience is seen just as it sees. The notion of the gaze as a unidirectional expression of male-female power relations does not work here. The *pollis* do not specify their own gender, but normally such ambiguity implies a male speaker or, at least, it seems likely that this would be the medieval assumption. The gaze remains problematic in Henryson's other poems where female characters are concerned, however, and this poem seems to indicate that Henryson has an interest in visual

perceptions of the body. The use of human skulls is enough to indicate the importance of the body to Henryson but the fact that the *pollis* address the audience directly is striking. That they do so in order to discuss the manner in which they are perceived is remarkable. The poem's mood is distinctly threatening to the audience and this is particularly unusual. It is rare for the narrator to appear to stare back at the audience. This is an alarming mutation of the normal experience of art. The proximity of the description of the dead heads to the somewhat threatening reminder that they were once alive like their audience is particularly unsettling and is one of Henryson's more effective uses of the physical to communicate a moral message. The threatening tone resurfaces in the third stanza:

Full laithly thus sall ly thy lusty heid,  
 Holkit and how, and wallowit as the weid;  
 Thy crampan hair and eik thy cristall ene  
 Full cairfully conclud sall dulefull deid... (*The Thre Deid Pollis*, 20-23)

The audience is here being encouraged to gaze upon the dead bodies of the speakers but also they are forced to imagine their *own* bodies as they will eventually appear. The *pollis* force each member of the audience to become conscious of his own mortality.

This poem demonstrates that if a gaze can be identified in poetry, it is not simply from the man upon the woman. Rather it is also directed towards other bodies, and startlingly, in this case, it is redirected upon the bodies of the audience itself. Tasioulas notes that, in line with other "medieval encounters between the living and the dead", the three skulls correspond to the three ages of

man: “Accordingly, this poem has the skulls appeal first of all to reckless youth and beautiful ladies ... then to those with power... and finally to the aged”.<sup>27</sup> The effect is to underline the universality of death and the poem’s primary purpose is to serve as a warning. Such warnings from the dead are relatively common in medieval art and literature but the accusatory tone of Henryson’s version is stronger than usual.<sup>28</sup> The dance of death is a common visual image in church art.<sup>29</sup> While writing within the *memento mori* tradition, Henryson’s own contribution to the imagination of the body in medieval literature is the confrontational attitude of the three skulls to the audience. They will not be gazed upon without gazing back. It is not clear that the degeneration and decay described in this poem are the *result* of vice. In *The Annunciation* bodily purity reflects moral purity, and I shall argue later that Cresseid’s physical decay is a reflection of her moral failures. *The Thre Deid Pollis* certainly does not imply that the speaking skulls are dead because of especially sinful lives. Rather they are dead because death is inevitable. It is made abundantly clear that this is the fate of all men: “Aganis deid na man nay mak defens” (36). The poem follows the traditional warning of death pattern. A common thread in Henryson’s poetry, therefore, is likely to be found in the ways bodies are spoken of, rather than solely in the moral framework that informs his poetry. After all, this moral framework is also available in Dunbar’s work and sometimes in that of Chaucer. The next analysis will consider a poem that brings together all of the ideas so far raised in this chapter. *The Testament of Cresseid* is a poem in which moral value

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27 Tasioulas 723.

28 Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, Eds., *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 15.

29 Claire Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1988) 34.

is seen to be perceptible in physical appearance, but in which the audience's attention is drawn to the rationale that informs their perceptions.

*The Testament of Cresseid: Moral Judgement Acted Out on the Body*

*The Testament of Cresseid* is a poem that makes use of intense body imagery and many critics have recognised the poet's concern for the physical. Matthew McDiarmid, for example, identifies "human waste" as one of the poem's key themes and indeed he argues that it is a concern of Henryson's poetry in general.<sup>30</sup> John MacQueen notes Henryson's direct debt to Boccaccio but remarks on the unique physicality of Henryson's adaptation: "The details added by Henryson have a strikingly visual effect – the chattering teeth and running eyes and nose of Saturn, the foam on the lips of Mars, the dazzling brightness of the face of Phoebus, and the red hood of Mercury".<sup>31</sup> These additions draw on the same visual qualities Henryson used in *The Thre Deid Pollis* and in the *Annunciation*. In this analysis it will be argued that the very visual physicality of the *Testament* is central to a critical understanding of how the poet envisages the audience's relationship to the realm of the physical. Henryson recognises that a person's individual experience of the bodies of others is usually dominated by sight. Descriptions of physical feeling by a poet rely on an audience's capacity to imagine and empathize with it. Henryson's descriptions of Cresseid lead to sympathy only in an audience who already have some empathy for her. The poet allows for the possibility that the audience might well condemn her. It is apparent in the critical literature that most readers are struck by Henryson's

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30 Matthew McDiarmid, *Robert Henryson*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981) 38.

31 John MacQueen, *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 49.

physicality and the visual nature of his characterization. Spearing's reading of the *Testament* focuses on growth and decay, or more specifically on love and decay:

Henryson's narrator (not necessarily of course to be identified with Henryson himself) has, like Chaucer's Troilus, undergone the experience of human love and its decay – “To help the Phisike quhair that nature faillit I am expert, for baith I have assailit” (34-35) - and then, by withdrawing from involvement in it, has been able to see it in clearer perspective. Troilus withdraws to the eighth sphere, the narrator of the *Testament* to the comfort of a private room.<sup>32</sup>

According to MacQueen the central metaphor of the poem is “decay and renewed growth, fading and rejuvenescence”.<sup>33</sup> This view seems compatible with McDiarmid's reading. The Christian reading, that Cresseid's leprosy is the result of her immorality but that she is redeemed through her physical suffering, has been very influential. One of the earliest and most influential readers to take this approach was E.M.W. Tillyard.<sup>34</sup> Denton Fox follows Tillyard in this assessment of the poem and also focuses on the symbolic meaning of leprosy in the Middle Ages. For Fox the relationship between leper and God has the potential to be purifying. According to this assessment leprosy purges the sinner of sin. Leprosy cures Cresseid spiritually but she still functions as a warning to others: “In the *Testament*, Henryson has skilfully introduced a walking corpse onto the stage, in

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<sup>32</sup> A. C. Spearing, “The Testament of Cresseid and the ‘High Concise Style’,” *Speculum* 37.2 (1962): 219.

<sup>33</sup> MacQueen 52.

<sup>34</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, “The Testament of Cresseid,” *Five Poems 1470-1870* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961). For a brief introduction to these arguments and Tillyard's influence see Dolores L. Noll, “The Testament of Cresseid: Are Christian Interpretations Valid?” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 9 (1971-72): 16-25. She argues that “this is courtly love morality, not Christian” (23). Nevertheless, courtly love develops in a Christian context, even if its origins are in Ovid.

the form of a character who has undergone the quasi-death of leprosy".<sup>35</sup> Fox draws convincing comparisons between the *Testament* and *The Thre Deid Pollis* and also sees a connection between Cresseid and Chaucer's Troilus:

Henryson's Cresseid goes through precisely the same cycle [as Chaucer's Troilus]: abandonment, suffering, death, wisdom and salvation. The different varieties of suffering which Troilus and Cresseid undergo are appropriate to their different characters as well as the different themes of the two poems: Troilus's sufferings are intellectual, connected with his intellectual error in making an earthly creature into an object of religious devotion; Cresseid's sufferings are physical, connected with her excessive desire for earthly safety and comfort, and with her sexual indulgences.<sup>36</sup>

Fox's argument is convincing. If Henryson's poem is read as a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* then it is fitting that Cresseid's suffering echoes that of Troilus. It is also fitting, however, that her suffering differs in nature to that of Troilus. The medieval association of the male with intellectual qualities and the female with physical qualities supports Fox's perspective. The visual descriptions of her physical decline would also support the view that Henryson's interest is in portraying as an essentially non-intellectual character.

However, there are significant differences between the *Testament* and *The Thre Deid Pollis*, and between Cresseid and Chaucer's Troilus. These are in danger of being glossed over in his analysis. Nancy Caciola notes the significance of the *quality* of an individual's death as well as their life in how they will be

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Henryson, *Testament of Cresseid*, ed. Denton Fox, Nelson's Medieval and Renaissance Library (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1968) 45.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 56.



judged in the afterlife or, in this context perhaps more importantly, by the surviving audience. In Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*,<sup>37</sup> she notes, different permutations of good and bad lives and deaths produce four possible outcomes.<sup>38</sup> How an individual died was as important a factor in the social judgement on a life and in the construction of memory as how he or she lived:

The question of 'bad' or 'evil' death has been a conceptual category of some significance throughout the Middle Ages. The moral significance of one's life was thought to be complemented by the specific kind of death one met; whether it was peaceful and expected, or sudden and violent. Thus the precise manner of one's death, as much as one's life, had a bearing upon one's fate in the afterlife.<sup>39</sup>

Henryson's Cresseid physically disintegrates as a result of her leprosy. As discussed above her disease is overtly linked to her moral failures.<sup>40</sup> Henryson uses his poetry to describe internal moral qualities in the visual externality of his characters' bodies. He makes the character apparent in the flesh of his subjects. His poem is as much a description of the manner of Cresseid's dying as it is of her living. Fox compares the talking heads of *The Thre Deid Pollis* to Cresseid since, as he sees it, they are both instances of corpse warnings. In Fox's view Cresseid is a walking corpse and so her warning is akin to that of the *thre pollis*. This may be so but the nature of the warning is rather different. Both poems warn that death

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37 Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, 2 vols. (N.p., 1851).

38 Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003) 75.

39 Ibid.

40 Modern reactions against readings of illness as metaphor are a strong indication of the extent to which such thinking is ingrained in post-medieval culture. See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 64.

and disintegration are inevitable. This is the main message of *The Thre Deid Pollis* and it is primarily human pride that is warned against in this poem. Such a warning can certainly be taken from the *Testament* but it is not the poem's most important moral message. Rather Cresseid's sufferings are a consequence of her broader moral behaviour. This shows two different ways in which Henryson can think about physical deterioration in terms of morality. They are related but they are distinct from one another. Nor should one accept Fox's comparison of Cresseid to Chaucer's Troilus without question. Fox correctly argues that Troilus' sufferings are intellectual while Cresseid's are physical. The significance of this difference might be more strongly stated, however. More important still is the subtlety of the distinction between Troilus and Cresseid. Fox's reading is not entirely fair to Cresseid. In fact, Troilus' sufferings are intellectual while Cresseid's are both physical and intellectual. McDiarmid reminds us that "Henryson himself observes that as *Troilus and Criseyde* is the tragedy of Troilus, this is the tragedy of Cresseid".<sup>41</sup> There is no question but that Cresseid suffers intellectual turmoil as well as physical. Her lamentation is very strong evidence for the intellectual suffering she undergoes:

The tragic events which he recounts (the "wofull end of this lustie Creisseid") are punctuated three times by passionate, highly amplified exclamations of grief ("lamentatioun"), which stand out sharply against the concise style of the factual record. Each lament - Cresseid's blasphemy against Cupid and Venus, her complaint in the spitalhouse, her self-accusatory lament for betraying Troilus - is provoked by an unexpected reversal in Cresseid's fortunes. She

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41 McDiarmid 91.

is jettisoned by Diomedes; she is afflicted with leprosy by the gods; and she is made the object of Troilus' charity (he flings gold and jewels into her lap). In response, Cresseid acts each time, through lamentation, to voice her loss, to fathom its cause, and to confront it with words.<sup>42</sup>

Craun's concern is particularly with the form of lamentation itself. His point is interesting because such lamentation is evidence that Cresseid's turmoil is intellectual as much as physical. The different narratorial perspectives mean that we do not access Cresseid's internal monologue, but that does not show that she is free of intellectual torment. MacQueen argues that Cresseid and Eurydice correspond to one another because both have appetites that are primarily non-intellectual<sup>43</sup>, and this certainly seems to be the case, but their *suffering* is most certainly intellectual as well as physical.

Henryson's focus on disintegration and eventual death seems to correspond well with the concerns of his era. John Huizinga notes that "no other age has so forcefully and continuously impressed the idea of death on the whole population as did the fifteenth century, in which the call of the *memento mori* echoes throughout the whole of life".<sup>44</sup> Henryson's descriptions of Cresseid also bring to mind the *memento mori*. Huizinga's reflections on death as it was perceived in the later Middle Ages seem particularly relevant to this poem:

Towards the end of the medieval period, the voice of the preachers was joined by a new kind of pictorial representation that, mostly in the form of woodcuts, reached all levels of society. These two

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<sup>42</sup> Edwin D. Craun, "Blaspheming Her 'Awin God': Cresseid's 'Lamentatioun' in Henryson's Testament," *Studies in Philology* 82.1 (1985): 25.

<sup>43</sup> MacQueen 67.

<sup>44</sup> Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Todney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 156.

forceful means of expression, the sermon and the picture, could only express the concept of death in very simple, direct, and lively images, abrupt and sharp. The contents of earlier monastic meditations about death were now condensed into a superficial, primitive, popular, and lapidary image and in this form held up to the multitudes in sermons and representations. This image of death was able to contain only one of the large numbers of conceptions related to death, *and that was perishability*. It seems as if the late medieval mind could see no other aspect of death than that of decay. [my italics]<sup>45</sup>

A strong concern for bodily decay is certainly evident in Henryson's poetry. Of the three motifs of death that Huizinga identifies, the *ubi sunt*, the "horrifying sight of the decomposition of all that had once constituted earthly beauty"<sup>46</sup>, and the *danse macabre*, Henryson's depiction of Cresseid focuses on the second. One might suggest that Cresseid's voice in the poem constitutes an extended *ubi sunt* lament. Henryson's description of Cresseid's decay is decidedly visual in nature. He invites the audience to 'see' what has happened to her:

O fair Creisseid, the flour and *A per se*  
 Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait  
 To change in filth all thy feminitie... (*Testament*, 78-81)

This exclamation comes before Cresseid's actual physical decay has become apparent, although it is implied early on in the poem. She is described as satisfying Diomedes's *appetyte* before he discards her. Her body will be metaphorically consumed by Diomedes's desires and literally consumed by her

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45 Ibid.

46 Ibid 157.

physical illness. The impact of her downfall is exacerbated by the physical nature of her earlier value to her lovers and thus to the audience. If she was the *flour* of Troy, then the *Testament* is a description of the withering of that flower. On the one hand the audience is invited to contemplate her perishing and feel disgust and perhaps compassion at it, while on the other hand the audience is offered an opportunity to reflect on the reactions of the other characters in the poem to her disintegration, and hence, their own feelings towards death and decay. The poem offers an unusual opportunity, therefore, to consider not just death and decay but also the reactions of the living to it. This is a rather different approach to that taken in the *Fables*, since here the moral is left to the audience to deduce, rather than being presented by the narrator. Henryson's frequent use of visual descriptions of Cresseid's physical decay and his focus on threats to the body highlight the seriousness of the poem's concerns for the audience. As in *The Thre Deid Pollis* the poet uses body imagery to create a connection between audience and character, even if that connection is one of discomfort.

Cynthia's judgement on Cresseid is telling because in her punishment two aspects are specified that will cause her both physical and emotional pain. On the one hand Cresseid will endure physical decay:

'Fra heit of bodie I the now depryue,  
 And to thy seiknes sall be na recure  
 Bot in dolour thy dayis to indure.  
 'Thy cristall ene mingit with blude I mak,  
 Thy voice sa cleir unplesand hoir and hace,  
 Thy lustie lyre ovirspreid with spottis blak,  
 And lumpis haw appeirand in thy face: (*Testament*, 334-340)

The focus here is on the removal of Cresseid's former health and beauty and its replacement with disease and ugliness. The punishment is all the more severe because of her former good fortune. Cynthia then concludes her punishment by telling Cresseid how people will react to her plight, not with pity but with disgust:

Quhair thow cummis, ilk man sall fle the place. (*Testament*, 341)

The audience's reaction to Cresseid's decay, therefore, is shaped not just by their own personal reactions to descriptions of bodily deterioration but also by the behaviour of the fictional characters who perceive her in the poem itself. Often the narrator guides our reaction, but in this instance it is Cynthia herself who both predicts and informs the reaction of the audience to Cresseid by reference to her audience within the poem. The poet encourages the audience to consider the implications of bodily decay early in the poem by creating an atmosphere in which the narrator himself is conscious of his own weakness and susceptibility to physical decay:

I mend the fyre and beikit me about,

Than tuik ane drink, my spreitis to comfort,

And armit me weill fra the cauld thairout. (*Testament*, 36-38)

From the beginning then, the audience's likely conclusion, that Cresseid's decay is a result of her own sin, is coupled with the foreknowledge that such decay is, nevertheless, inevitable for all. It is also clear that while the narrator appears to leave the audience to make its own judgement on Cresseid, they are in fact guided by the example of Cresseid's observers and their reactions to her in the poem itself.

It is interesting to note that even Cresseid's own experience of her bodily decay is decidedly visual in nature. The narrator does not invite us to share in her feelings of pain as she rots and as she observes her body rotting. Nor is the audience challenged to understand what it must feel like to slowly wither away. Rather they are presented with the disgusting image of her decay and the conceit of the dream in which she is condemned by the gods allows for a situation in which she too is presented with the sudden *visual* shock of her decaying body:

...than rais scho up and tuik

Ane poleist glas, and hir schaddow culd luik;

And quhen scho saw hir face sa deformait,

Gif scho in hart was wa aneuch, God wait! (*Testament*, 347-350)

In other works the audience is allowed to share in the physical experience of characters, but through the characters' eyes rather than in the sense of an imagined sharing in their bodily experience. In this poem the character shares the audience's visual experience of their changing bodies. The physicality of Cresseid's demise might lead the audience to think of Henryson's writing as being realistic, in the sense that it describes the gruesome fate of a leper with reasonable accuracy. This incident shows, however, that Henryson is more concerned with the passage's emotional impact on the audience than with the accuracy of the account. In this respect he is successful.

The narrator makes it very clear that much of the tragedy of Cresseid's fate is connected to the perceptions of others. Her public image is important to her and so a major aspect of her experience of her downfall is the degradation of that public image. Her father shares her concern for reputation. When her father

helps her to the *spittail hous* to suffer her fate in secret he takes care to ensure that she is not seen:

Than in ane mantill and ane baver hat,  
 With cop and clapper, wonder prively,  
 He opnit ane secret yet and out thairat  
 Convoyit hir, that na man suld espy... (*Testament*, 386-389)

As Cynthia has predicted much of the suffering that Cresseid must endure is connected to the shame associated with her illness and her changed appearance. Part of her torment is the public knowledge that she is to die a bad death. Despite the shame of her disfigurement, the narrator allows her a token dignity. Some at the *spittail hous* presume her to be of noble kin because of *hir hie regrait*. Again appearances are of paramount importance, and there is a hint here that physical appearance is partly a matter of bearing as well as of physical disposition. Nevertheless this moment in which her former grace survives serves only to deepen the sense of loss caused by her new lowly condition.

The critics examined so far have read Cresseid's fate as a just Christian punishment for her indiscretions. In fact, there are three main schools of thought when it comes to Cresseid and the justice (or injustice) of her plight. The first is the Christian reading. A second argues that it is the gods themselves who are unjust in their terrible punishment of Cresseid. A third group of critics tries to strike a balance between these two readings and argues that if there is a divine logic to the poem the gods go too far in their punishment.<sup>47</sup> This last argument is supported by Fox's reading of the Fables as a unified whole that "present[s] a

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<sup>47</sup> John B. Friedman, "Henryson's Testament of Cresseid and the Judicio Solis in Conviviis Saturni of Simon of Couvin," *Modern Philology* 83.1 (1985): 12-21.



graphic image of the folly and vicissitudes of the natural world".<sup>48</sup> Each argument has its own merits, but each also allows for a Cresseid who is intellectually tormented. After all, she has suffered much misfortune and in the circumstances one would expect just the reaction that she displays. All three approaches also allow for the physical punishment of Cresseid for her misbehaviour. Christian belief seems to accommodate such a punishment and pagan justice would certainly allow for it. Friedman argues for the *Judicio Solis* of Simon of Couvin as a primary source for Henryson's approach both to astrological determinism and to the plague and leprosy as diseases intended to punish mankind or individuals:

Leprosy and the plague, in their status as divine punishments, share a common tradition. But whereas the plague was associated with universal wrongdoing and God's broad condemnation of the human race, leprosy was a more individual punishment for more personal sins. It would, therefore, have been quite natural for Henryson, while borrowing the idea of a planetary court from Simon of Couvin's *Judicio Solis*, to have revised the sentence to fit his particular defendant.<sup>49</sup>

Friedman's suggestion seems plausible, and there are other texts that could have influenced Henryson and encouraged him towards similar beliefs.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, Cresseid's plight can also be read as a purely physical effect of her promiscuous behaviour since leprosy was often considered to be a venereal disease. While this reading is plausible, there is no direct evidence within the text for assuming that Cresseid's leprosy was transmitted venereally. McDiarmid

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<sup>48</sup> Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," *ELH* 29.4 (1962): 356.

<sup>49</sup> Friedman 1985, 21.

<sup>50</sup> One example is the *Compendium de Epidemia*, popular in Scotland. See Friedman 1985, 13.

dismisses this reading off-hand, describing it as a “peculiarly modern debasement of the heroine’s situation, quite unevidenced by the text”.<sup>51</sup>

McDiarmid’s reaction to this reading is rather strong and it is clear that leprosy had at least connotations of venereality in medieval thought. The narrator’s description of her as *gigotlike* (82) certainly strengthens any argument that her behaviour is wanton. Her sexual behaviour is a *foull plesance* (82) – the narrator’s judgement is not ambiguous here. The audience is likely to feel both pity and disgust simultaneously for Cresseid. Both are natural responses to her fate but they are also strongly influenced by cultural attitudes to leprosy. Post-medieval perceptions of medieval leprosy and attempts to control it have been demonstrated to be inaccurate: “Contrary to the trenchant views of nineteenth-century polemicists, fears of contagion (as understood today) were slow to develop and never universal”.<sup>52</sup> Even Rawcliffe accepts, however, that while actual historical treatment of lepers may have been more sympathetic than we have been led to believe, literary treatments of the group of illnesses that medieval people perceived to be leprosy were indeed moralistic and often harshly judgemental. Rawcliffe argues that Saul Brody “presents a consistently bleak and intermittently censorious account of responses to the disease”.<sup>53</sup> While this is true, Brody’s understanding of medieval leprosy is heavily informed by literary accounts of the disease and public reaction to it, and in literature leprosy provides a useful metaphor for the bitter fruits of moral corruption. Of course “saints as well as sinners might be leprous”<sup>54</sup>, but medieval audiences knew how to identify a sinful character. On the other hand, for the very reasons outlined

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51 McDiarmid 100.

52 Rawcliffe 2006, 4.

53 Ibid 39. She refers to Saul Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974).

54 Ibid 47.

above, leprosy might also be seen as a form of suffering intended to purge the soul. It could function as a form of purgatory in this lifetime: "Suffering was, as St. Hugh of Lincoln recognised, an elevated rung on the ladder of perfection, which bestowed upon the leper a glowing 'internal splendour'".<sup>55</sup> Furthermore Christ's compassion towards lepers complicated matters (Matthew 8:2). Negative attitudes towards lepers could seem overly censorious when Christ's example was one of compassion. Simultaneous disgust and compassion are characteristic features of medieval responses to leprosy. In choosing to write of a leprous character, then, Henryson deliberately chose a subject to whom audiences would have a complicated set of reactions.

Some critics draw attention to similarities between Henryson's *Cresseid* and his *Eurydice*. Both have non-intellectual, indeed lustful, appetites and both suffer for this. As MacQueen notes, however, *Cresseid*'s position is more complex than that of *Eurydice*:

In the first part of the poem it is helpful to regard *Cresseid* as the equivalent of *Eurydice*, but her function becomes more complex, combining in the latter part of the poem allegorical features of Orpheus with those of *Eurydice*.<sup>56</sup>

Thus *Eurydice* and *Cresseid* represent different poetic explorations of human suffering, both intellectual and physical. The difference between the two might be seen primarily in terms of their self-consciousness, with *Eurydice* being a far more passive participant in affairs, despite *Cresseid*'s suffering as a type for "all inevitable suffering passively endured by humanity..."<sup>57</sup> *Eurydice*'s suffering is

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid 59.

<sup>56</sup> MacQueen 82.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid 85.

represented through her entrapment in the underworld; Cresseid's on the other hand is more complex. It is a matter of physical disfigurement through leprosy, but also one of recognition, or lack thereof. Identity, in the *Testament*, is wrapped up in physical completeness, the same quality that the Virgin Mary exemplifies in the *Annunciation*. Cresseid's disfigurement is physically uncomfortable but what is truly shocking, both to her and to the audience, is that Troilus does not recognise her. This is prefigured by her own lack of self-recognition – she has changed beyond repair. If physical completeness, especially for women, is set up in Henryson's poetry, and indeed in much other medieval poetry, as that which gives a beautiful woman value, then to lose this wholeness is to lose one's value and to lose one's sense of self. From this perspective the reading of Cresseid as a 'walking corpse' is particularly apt. Cresseid really loses her dignity when leprosy changes her, not when she eventually dies. Cresseid's self-image and her actual physical appearance are connected in a complex manner which may be read as a psychological explanation of her downfall. As MacQueen notes, she sees herself as a disfigured person before the story makes her so.<sup>58</sup>

In the poem, then, there is a complex interplay between Cresseid as she is perceived by the narrator and by the audience, as she perceives herself, and as other characters perceive her at different points in the poem. There is not a simple chain of consequences according to which she acts, is therefore morally corrupt, and then becomes physically corrupted. Henryson deliberately juxtaposes the language of purity with the language of corruption at an early stage in the poem:

O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se

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58 Ibid 61.

Of Troy and Grece, how was thow fortunait  
 To change in filth all thy feminitie,  
 And be with fleschelic lust so maculait,  
 And go amang the Greikis air and lait,  
 Sa gigotlike takand thy foull plesance!

I haue pitie thow suld fall sic mischance! (*Testament*, 78-84)

I have argued in this chapter that that body issues in Henryson's poetry go hand in hand with issues of perception. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Testament of Cresseid*. As has been discussed, her fate is social as much as it is physical, and yet this social fate is in no way abstracted from the condition of her body. Rather it is a consequence of her physical condition and, more importantly, with the visibility of her physical condition. One might offer an interesting thought-experiment to illustrate this point: how different would Cresseid's case be were her punishment the same slow physical decline, but one that was not so cruelly public (for example some interior disease)? The whole nature of the poem would be profoundly different. This is because although the condition from which Cresseid suffers causes her physical decline, the fact that people know about it is the real cause of her anguish. Henryson, in writing the *Testament*, explores the social significance of the body. This is an exploration prefigured in *The Thre Deid Pollis*, as the audience is encouraged to look upon themselves in parallel with looking at the decayed body of another.

*Orpheus and Eurydice: Perception*

This line of thought in Henryson's writing finds a neat summation in his *Orpheus and Eurydice*. In *Orpheus and Eurydice* the issue of perception becomes more overt. Henryson chooses to retell a story which has the gaze as its central motif. In *Orpheus and Eurydice*, the cause of bodily demise (Eurydice's 'dedlike body') is presented ambiguously. It is implied that, as in the *Testament*, this death has some negative shameful cause:

Quod he: 'My lady leill and my delyt,  
 Full wo is me to se yow changit thus.  
 Quhair is your rude as rose wyth cheikis quhyte,  
 Your cristell ene with blenkis amorus,  
 Your lippis reid to kiss delicious?'  
 Quod sho: 'As now I der nocht tell, perfay,  
 Bot ye sall wit the caus ane uthir day.' (*Orpheus and Eurydice*, 352-358)

This loosely aligns Eurydice with Cresseid, though some audiences might judge Eurydice to be more fortunate, or at least less guilty, than Cresseid. This poem, far from being an account of her rejection by a lover, is the story of her lover's attempt to rescue her from the clutches of death. While Eurydice suffers, she at least has the dignity of a lover's attempt to rescue her from her fate. It is not entirely clear why Henryson adds an element of moral ambiguity in the lines above. Accounts of the reasons for Eurydice's death differ. While in some versions she flees the satyr, in others (including Ovid's) her death is caused by her dancing with naiads on her wedding day. Her reluctance to explain the cause

of her death to Orpheus in this version might be a gesture towards the ambiguity of the tradition. Her pursuit by a satyr seems an unlikely reason for her not to tell the cause of her downfall. The dance with the naiads seems a more likely cause, but the narrator leaves the matter open for discussion.

In the analysis of the *Testament of Cresseid* I began by focusing on Henryson's descriptions of Cresseid's body and then looked at his consideration of the role of perception in the story – how the perception of Cresseid's body by characters in the poem can come to affect the audience's perception of Cresseid's body. In this analysis of *Orpheus and Eurydice* it will also be necessary to consider the perception of body and decay. In *Orpheus* more than in any other of his poems, Henryson again displays his sensitivity to the role of perception and the gaze in our understanding of physicality. Physical bodies are not just 'experienced' as living vessels which are inhabited, rather they are visually perceived by others and they are also perceived by the person himself – they are as much a part of the outside world of perception as they are of the lived world of the self. Furthermore one's experience of others is heavily influenced by one's perception of their bodies. Much of this has already been discussed in the above analysis of the *Testament*. *Orpheus and Eurydice* is of interest because Henryson chooses to retell a story which justifies a reading of his poetry that puts gaze at its centre. The poem is not a tale of Eurydice's body in the same way that the *Testament* is the tale of Cresseid's body. The protagonist of *Orpheus and Eurydice* is Orpheus' gaze. The audience is presented with a narrative of his visions as he travels through hell. Before this analysis of the poem can be continued, it will be valuable to examine one of Henryson's best known fables, and in so doing to consider his understanding of the relationship between body and soul.

If one is looking for a perspective on the relationship between soul and body in Henryson's writing then the fables in general, and *The Preaching of the Swallow* in particular, are a good place to start. That Henryson proceeds from the common Aristotelian and Aquinian understanding of the relationship between body, soul and intellect seems quite clear in his texts. His references are both Biblical and Aristotelian. To argue for an Aristotelian connection is justified since there is an overt reference to the *Metaphysics*, mentioned below, and, as Wheatley argues, the prologue to the *Fables* employs the word *cause* in ways that make clear its Aristotelian connections.<sup>59</sup> Henryson mentions the irrationality of beasts, for example, in *The Cock and the Fox*: "Thocht brutall beistis be irracionall..." (397). This calls to mind Aristotle's grades of living things, in which man is distinguished by his rationality (*De Anima* III). In the *The Preaching of the Swallow* Henryson makes direct reference to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

In *Metaphisik* Aristotell sayis  
 That mannis sail is lyke ane bakkis ee,  
 Quhilk lurkis still, als lang as licht of day is,  
 And in the gloming cummis furth to fle;  
 Hir ene are waik, the sone scho may not se:  
 Sa is our saull with fantasie opprest,  
 To know the thingis in nature manifest. (*The Preaching of the Swallow*, 1636 – 42)

Furthermore, according to Aristotelian thinking (and Christians following Thomas Aquinas), the intellect of the First Mover is perfect – in fact He is pure intellect, outside time:

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<sup>59</sup> Edward Wheatley, "Scholastic Commentary and Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis*: The Aesopic Fables," *Studies in Philology* 91.1 (1994): 70-99.



The hie prudence and wirking mervelous,  
 The profound wit off God omnipotent,  
 Is sa perfyte and sa ingenious,  
 Excelland far all mannis iugement;  
 For quhy to him all thing is ay present,  
 Rycht as it is or ony tyme sall be,  
 Befoir the sicht of his divinite. (*The Preaching of the Swallow*,  
 1622-28)

This section echoes Theseus' speech (in turn drawing on Boethius) in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Many of the same concerns are raised by these poems. A critical reading of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* leads to questions of the intersection between pagan justice and Christian justice. The *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* both share these concerns. Henryson clearly inherits them from Chaucer, but his treatment is much less ambiguous than Chaucer's. This early section of *The Preaching of the Swallow* speaks to *Orpheus and Eurydice*, from a perspective that is both Aristotelian and Christian, implicitly condemning Orpheus' journey to the underworld. It implies that Orpheus should have accepted his fate rather than resisting it:

For God is in his power infinite,  
 And mannis saull is febill and ouer small,  
 Of understanding waik and unperfite  
 To comprehend him that contenis all;  
 Nane suld presume ,be ressoun naturall,  
 To seirche the secreitis off the Trinitie,

Bot trow fermelie and lat all ressoun be. (*The Preaching of the Swallow*, 1642-49)

Both arguments encourage the individual to accept his fate, but where in Chaucer Aristotelian logic and Christian faith are conflated, in Henryson they are treated as opposing principles, and yet they lead to the same conclusion. *The Preaching of the Swallow* draws the discussion towards the seasonal nature of life, following a common tradition which includes the encyclopedists, "sculpture, ...the graphic arts, and ...poetry".<sup>60</sup> Again we see Henryson focussing on common themes – the seasonal nature of life is in essence the very growth and decay that we see in the *Testament*. Denton Fox reads Henryson's fables, which he sees as a unified whole<sup>61</sup>, as a tapestry of the cruelty of the natural world, a cruelty that results from its seasonality:

In the same way, all of Henryson's animals, not only those who choose blindly or arrogantly the worst course, but also those who are guiltlessly destroyed by other beasts or who escape after great perils and torments, present a graphic image of the folly and vicissitudes of the natural world.<sup>62</sup>

What Henryson shows in the *Fables*, according to Fox, is how man can act if he degrades himself to the level of the animals.<sup>63</sup> In both *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the *Testament of Cresseid* we witness the same degradation, described metaphorically in similar, but different ways. It is apparent that the notion that our bodily, or animal, nature as being degraded is tied up with Henryson's understanding of the body. One can, with some justification, argue for an

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<sup>60</sup> *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox 274.

<sup>61</sup> Fox 1962, 338.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid* 356.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid* 340.

association between sight and the spiritual or non-corporeal aspect of the individual. From this perspective, the physical corruption associated with moral decay in the *Testament* follows an allegorical logic. The judgement of others is represented in the faculty of sight and the sinner suffers in their judgement. Hence it is necessary for physical punishment to be perceptible as this is also the faculty by which judgement was passed. In returning to *Orpheus and Eurydice*, then, we should bear in mind the role of sight as an instrument of judgement.

If the protagonist of this poem is Orpheus then his gaze is its most important symbolic tool. One can look upon the poem as an enactment of the judgement to which Cresseid feels subject in *The Testament of Cresseid*. To clarify: so far this chapter has described the process by which sight and perception (that is, the gaze) relate to the body, particularly the corrupted body (and therefore, all bodies). I have argued that this process is apparent in aspects of several of Henryson's poems. The *Testament* draws together both the relationship between morality and physical appearance and the importance of perception. In *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Henryson finds a literary precursor that serves as an allegory for the process itself. Furthermore in the *moralitas* that Henryson gives for the poem it becomes apparent that, for him, this relationship between physicality and perception is analogous to the relationship between "the part intellectiue" and "oure affection", or as outlined in *The Preaching of the Swallow*, between the soul and the body. It is not a perfect analogy. In the *Testament* we see not the relationship between Cresseid's own intellect and physicality, but rather Cresseid as a representative of animal sensuality and its consequences, and those who perceive her (and therefore judge her) take on the role of the intellect, or soul. Henryson's *moralitas* for *Orpheus and Eurydice*

dwells on the role of the intellect and the sensual body in human affairs and makes explicit the allegorical nature of the poem:

Fair Phebus is the god of sapience;  
 Caliope, his wyfe, is eloquence;  
 This twa, mareit, gat Orpheus belyfe,  
 Quhilk callit is the pairte intellectyfe  
 Of mannis saule and understanding, fre  
 And separate fra sensualitie.  
 Euridices is our effection,  
 Be fantasy oft movit up and down;  
 Quhile to ressonne it castis the delyte,  
 Quhile to the flesch it settis the appetyte. (*Orpheus and Eurydice*,  
 425-434)

The story of Orpheus, then, is to be taken as a representation of the internal dynamic between an individual's sensuality and their intellect. Whereas in the other poems considered the audience does not have access to the internal psychology of the characters, in this poem the *moralitas* makes clear to the audience that the relationship between the characters is a good analogy for human psychology. It is interesting that while Henryson showed a reluctance to move past visual perception as a method of characterization in his other poems, in this poem supposed visual perceptions are in fact shown to represent the relationship between different aspects of the soul. In this allegorical account of human intellect and desire, Euridice is whimsical desire itself. In the *moralitas* Euridice becomes a symbol rather than a real woman. Nevertheless Henryson applies normative gender expectations to her. Just as women are associated with

the carnal and with lack of control over the intellect in the medieval imagination, so the human mind's tendency to whimsy in its desires is itself figured as a woman. The body-imagery of *Orpheus and Eurydice* does not end with Euridice nor is it limited to the bodies of women. Greed is signified most graphically in Tantalus (519). The relative value of bodies is graphically described in Tantalus' slaying and cooking of his own son. Greed, it is shown, causes the greedy to consume themselves, to destroy their own flesh and blood. Man's desire to know more than he is allowed is figured in Titius who tried to divine the future using his own entrails. One might think the inevitable pain caused by his own actions might be punishment enough, but in fact is sent to hell by Apollo. The moral is entirely appropriate to its Boethian source: no man should try to discover that "quhilk nane in erd may knaw but God allane" (576).

The *moralitas* of *Orpheus and Euridice* makes it clear that for Henryson there is a clear moral significance to the action in his poetry. One might suggest that the occasionally surprising *moralitates* of his *Fables*, mentioned earlier in this chapter, give good reason not to trust the *moralitas* of *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Tasioulas notes that audience dissatisfaction with what might seem a rather cold *moralitas* "may be part of Henryson's message: reason tells us one thing but desire demands something else".<sup>64</sup> Boethius is useful as a source because his moral is explicit and because he is a well respected authority. Henryson does not tend to describe internal psychological processes and yet *Orpheus and Euridice* demonstrates that he was seriously concerned with the inner workings of the human mind. He seems unwilling, however, to allow his narrators to gain much more than a visual impression of events within each story. In the *Testament of*

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64 Tasioulas 707

*Cresseid* in particular the audience is allowed to see the suffering of Cresseid, but does not gain access to her internal monologue. More importantly still, even Cresseid herself experiences her pain as something to be perceived as happening to her rather than to be directly felt. The explicit moral of *Orpheus and Euridice* shows, however, that Henryson intended the audience to consider Cresseid's psychological distress as much as her physical discomfort. The graphically visual nature of Henryson's poetry suggests that he expected his audience to do the work of the *moralitas* and to come to read the poems through the lens of Christian morality.

This chapter has shown that while Henryson shares the Christian perspective of Chaucer and Dunbar, he is more consistently judgemental in his approach. His interest in the impact of moral decisions on the body echoes Chaucer's interests, but his authorial technique ensures a more limited audience perspective. Unlike Chaucer and Dunbar his gaze tends to focus squarely on female bodies. The following chapter will show that while Dunbar offers a similar moral perspective to Henryson in his short poems, in his longer poems he has more in common with Chaucer. Dunbar's poetry shifts the gaze back upon men, and he attempts to imagine female attitudes towards male bodies. His most extravagant use of the language of the body is in the *Flyting*, and in this poem he negotiates the tricky subject of men speaking of other men. Henryson borrows Chaucer's association between the body and moral appearance. Dunbar borrows and builds upon Chaucer's capacity to shift perspective.

## Chapter 5: William Dunbar and the Male Body

In the preceding chapters it was shown that Chaucer and Henryson pay particular attention to the ways in which bodies demonstrate moral character. It was argued that Chaucer's primary interest was in undermining the casual acceptance of the social construction of the body by highlighting multiple discourses of the body and by creating characters and narrators for whom there is a juxtaposition between physical appearance, moral character, and the mode of discourse called upon.

Henryson was shown to share Chaucer's interest in bodies, but his gaze is focused more squarely on female bodies and his primary interest is in moral judgement. It was also proposed that, while Chaucer sometimes speaks of how characters feel, Henryson communicates the feelings of his subjects only through a visual narrative. This chapter will trace Dunbar's shifting perspective on the body through his poetry. Like Henryson, Dunbar is indebted to Chaucer, but he also differs in his approach to the body. While his poems do have a moral focus, his longer poems appear to highlight the ways in which people value the bodies of others. Like Chaucer he allows the gaze to focus back on men, but unlike Chaucer he creates a fictional scenario in which an audience can hear women's attitudes to men in supposed privacy. His language of the body raises serious issues concerning the body's temporality as well as highlighting areas of anxiety in men's attitudes towards their own bodies. Despite the moral undertones of many of his short poems, the value of bodies in his longer poetry is essentially in their sexual utility. Like Chaucer, Dunbar's gaze is wider than that of Henryson and he pays much more attention to

men's bodies. Male bodies are, like those of women, seen as things that can either have value or, indeed, be degraded. While Chaucer's examination of male bodies tended to focus on the question of morality, Dunbar focuses on both morality and sexuality. One can see, in this, a movement away from a gaze that is uniquely male towards a more universal gaze. Rather than halting the objectification of women, however, this new poetic perspective simply extends objectification to men and designates them as objects like women. Dunbar is no proto-feminist, but if a modern audience can identify a certain toxicity in the male gaze in much medieval literature, the same audience might find Dunbar equally caustic in his treatment of men. It is not just the narrator's perspective that changes in Dunbar's poetry. Female characters appropriate a language normally used in reference to their own bodies to evaluate and critique men and the bodies of men. Dunbar also allows men to criticise other men by reference to their bodies. He directs the reader's gaze towards male bodies in a way that was hinted at in Chaucer's writing (in particular in the voice of Alys and in the characters of the Pardoner and the Summoner), but that was absent in Henryson's moral approach to female bodies. Dunbar combines Chaucer's breadth of gaze with a somewhat cynical mimicry of Henryson's moral undertones. Comparisons with Henryson's moralizing are appropriate, but for Dunbar, in the longer poems at least, such a tone is more a literary technique than an indication of moral judgement. Where his narrator or his characters demonstrate moral judgement they seem more concerned with the earthly consequences of bad behaviour than with its spiritual consequences, and Dunbar highlights social judgement rather than pointing to universal judgement grounded in faith. Tasioulas



describes Dunbar's verse as "a stinging invective against the greed, back-biting and selfishness of court society..."<sup>1</sup> His commentary on his own society is grounded in its own discourse and terms and does not, by and large, appeal to a higher power. Like Henryson, he tends not borrow the authoritative discourse of medicine and instead relies on new uses for the language of courtly love poetry. Dunbar inherits the tradition of both Chaucer and Henryson and, while he is innovative, his novel ways of speaking of the body owe much to Chaucer's Wife of Bath and to the tradition from which she herself has been drawn. The voices in Dunbar's poetry, both male and female, share with Alys much of her secular vulgarity. Dunbar has been described by at least one critic as a "conservative poet".<sup>2</sup> This study will not find evidence to the contrary. His harsh judgement on his peers and on the characters in his own poetry is certainly conservative in its appeal to existing social mores. One might question whether Dunbar was conservative in his literary technique, however, and this chapter will highlight some innovative aspects of his poetry, in terms of his descriptions of the body, his choices about whose bodies to describe, and the focus of his narratorial gaze.

### *Dunbar in Context*

Dunbar's poetry is largely occasional. His work is understood by most critics to be a series of poems for specific occasions, rather than a body of work with a strong thematic focus or any formal frame. Many critics see his writing as shifting

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1 Tasioulas 4.

2 Ian Simpson Ross, *William Dunbar*, Medieval and Renaissance Authors (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 2.

from one form to another, depending on the circumstances. Critics have, understandably, paid much attention to Dunbar's historical context.<sup>3</sup> Because of the occasional nature of the bulk of Dunbar's work, his poetry tends to draw attention to its historical context by explicitly situating the poet in his times and his real-world environment. Critical readings of Dunbar have attempted to contextualise each individual poem and have used historical evidence to associate poems with the specific historical events that appear to have occasioned their composition. Studies have ranged from discussions of the historical significance of poems such as the *Thrissil and the Rois*, a poem judged to be about the marriage of James IV, to less conclusive attempts to find a historical context for poems like *The Merle and the Nychtingall*. Others have examined the social context of Dunbar's poetry.<sup>4</sup> In light of the ongoing historicization of his poetry it will be useful to briefly summarise what we know of William Dunbar.

Flourishing about one hundred years after Chaucer's death and contemporary with, but longer-lived than, Robert Henryson, Dunbar's early life as we know it is largely a series of possible vocations. There is general agreement that he was born in East Lothian.<sup>5</sup> From documentary evidence we know he may have been educated at St. Andrews in the late 1470s. From his own poetry some have surmised that from then to about 1500 he was a travelling Franciscan novice and a preacher in the king's service.<sup>6</sup> Much of this evidence is persuasive, but it is likely

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3 Tasioulas' introduction to Dunbar, for example, speaks in terms of the historical context of Dunbar's writing.

4 Elizabeth Ross Eddy, "Sir Thopas and Sir Thomas Norny: Romance Parody in Chaucer and Dunbar," *Review of English Studies* 22.88 (1971): 401-409.

5 Simpson Ross 1.

6 William Dunbar, *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) xiii.

that critics have placed too much trust in this version of his life-story.<sup>7</sup> The reader cannot be sure whether all that Dunbar says of himself in his poetry is to be taken at face-value. We do know that by 1504 he had taken priest's orders.<sup>8</sup> The king he served was James IV, a figure who appears to have had a formidable influence on Dunbar's life and one who overshadows much of his poetry. It is a relationship of service in a far more straightforward way than that of, for example, Chaucer and John of Gaunt. Dunbar is one of a group of poets in late fifteenth-century Scotland who seem to have flourished under James IV.<sup>9</sup> It is often said that if James III is sometimes referred to as the first Renaissance King of Scotland, James IV was probably the first king to really deserve the title. The story, legendary or otherwise, about his experiment to discern the earliest language serves to illustrate his association with an interest in language, the sciences and the arts.<sup>10</sup> It certainly demonstrates his reputation as a literary influence and as a learned man. Influences on Dunbar are varied to say the least. Much emphasis has been placed on his debt to Chaucer. Indeed he is often referred to as one of the 'Scottish Chaucerians', alongside James I, Henryson and Gavin Douglas. Others have pointed to the many other influences on him, from Biblical sources to classical influences, from Villon<sup>11</sup> (whose influence is questionable) to Lydgate (whose influence seems rather more likely).<sup>12</sup> His poetry is preserved in both manuscripts and prints (by Walter

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7 M. Hartnett, "William Dunbar. The Friar Poet of the Fifteenth Century," *The Irish Monthly* 61.725 (1933): 702-706. Hartnett is certain of Dunbar's status as a 'Friar-poet'.

8 *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley xiii.

9 Joy Hendry, "The Gowk's Nest: The Scottish Literary Scene," *The Poetry Ireland Review* 31 (1991): 1-12. A survey of the Scottish literary scene which briefly puts Dunbar in the context of the last 800 years or so of Scottish poetry.

10 Douglas Guthrie, "The Medical and Scientific Exploits of King James IV of Scotland," *British Medical Journal* 1.4821 (1953): 1191-1193.

11 A.M. Kinghorn, "Dunbar and Villon: A Comparison and a Contrast," *The Modern Language Review* 62.2 (1967): 195-208.

12 Pierrepont H. Nichols, "William Dunbar as a Scottish Lydgatian," *PMLA* 46.1 (1932): 214-224.

Chepman and Andrew Myllar) from the 1500's and early 1600's.<sup>13</sup> He is thought to have died in about 1520, although this is assumed because of his absence from the records thereafter, and because of David Lyndsay's reference to him as a dead poet in the *The Testament and Complaynt of our Soverane Lordis Papyngo* from 1530.<sup>14</sup> His absence from the records may owe much to the loss of the Battle of Flodden and the death of his patron there. Tasioulas comments that "If Henryson's world combines high and low, nobleman and peasant, Dunbar's is concerned with a far narrower social milieu".<sup>15</sup> This seems a fair observation and it makes sense in the light of the direct patronage from which he is believed to have benefited. *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, while a public document, is very much in the vein of medieval correspondence (like Chaucer's *envois*). Dunbar's historical context is important, but for this analysis it is the social information that such historical analyses can provide that is most useful. His milieu and its social norms put his treatment of bodies in context and give us some indication as to the standards by which he felt able to praise or to blame.

On the one hand Dunbar produced the "dazzling" poetry of *The Goldyn Targe*, a poem "characterized by an intense preoccupation with craft".<sup>16</sup> On the other hand *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Women and the Wedo* develops themes he finds in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the Old French *Chanson de Mal Mariee*.<sup>17</sup> Critics have tended to see, but disagree about, Dunbar's development of earlier

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13 *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley xiv-xv.

14 David Lyndsay, *Selected Poems*, ed. Janet Hadley Williams (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2000).

15 Tasioulas 4.

16 Lois Ebin, "The Theme of Poetry in Dunbar's *Goldyn Targe*," *Chaucer Review* 7.2 (1972):147-59.

17 Roy J. Percy, "The Genre of William Dunbar's *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*," *Speculum* 55.1 (1980): 58-74.

themes, whether these are the nature of poetry itself (in the *Golden Targe*), the bawdy, romance parody and social satire (in *Sir Thomas Norny*), the body politic (in the *Thrissil and the Rois*), or the development of a more personal poetry (as compared to, for example, Villon). Relatively few critics have examined the language of the body in Dunbar, with the notable exception of Jan Ziolkowski, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis. The wide range of forms used by Dunbar can serve to distract from his interest in the language of the body. His *Fletyng*, for example, shows him to be a virtuoso of florid vulgarity, with much of his language drawing upon bodily function and bodily disfigurement. Whether he coined it or not, Dunbar's description of Kennedie as *cunt-bittin* is memorable, to say the least. This chapter will pay close attention to such vivid body imagery. Readings of the *Flyting*, however, have tended to give an account of its remarkable historical context and have attempted to find, in the language used, references to extra-textual events. There is certainly room for an analysis of this poem that pays greater attention to the place of the body itself. This analysis begins, however, with a consideration of a poem in which Dunbar looks back to his predecessors and shares features with his contemporaries.

*An Example of Continuity: Hale, Sterne Superne, Hale, in Eterne*

Dunbar's poetry does not demonstrate a complete break with his predecessors. In many respects he is, as a number of critics argue, a traditional poet. As noted he makes use of a number of existing forms, but in each case he develops

an existing form of poetry without dramatically deviating from his exemplars. *Hale, Sterne Superne, Hale, in Eterne* is an example of his writing at its most traditional. Tasioulas notes that despite the abundance of Marian devotion in the Middle Ages, “Dunbar rivals any poem of the age with his almost exhaustive list of Marian attributes and imagery”.<sup>18</sup> *Hale, Sterne Superne* catalogues Mary’s attributes and while Dunbar’s poem is perhaps more exhaustive than others, it also brings together the imagery of the tradition into one poem. One can readily identify both its debt to the tradition of Marian dedication poetry and its similarity to poems such as those of his contemporary Henryson. It is a poem that shares much, for example, with *The Annunciation*. In *Hale, Sterne Superne* we are presented with a set of images of the good clean woman (and indeed her good, clean body). She is the ‘fresche floure femynyne’ and the ‘moder and maide but makle’ (*Hale, Sterne Superne*, 10, 22). The poem describes Mary’s completeness in time as well as in her physicality and it also uses traditional images for her perfection, for example the star, the rose, the queen, the mother, and the virgin:

Hodiern, modern, sempitern,  
 Angellicall regyne,  
 Our tern inferne for to disperne,  
 Helpe rialest rosyne. (*Hale, Sterne Superne*, 5-8)

Like Henryson, Dunbar uses the language of absence to describe Mary’s perfection, and like Henryson, for Dunbar it is both physical penetration and imperfection that are absent from Mary; she is archetypally without blemish:

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18 Tasioulas 789.

Haile, moder and maide but makle...

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Haile, schene, unseyne with carnale eyne...

.....

Haile, clene bedene ay till conteyne (*Hale, Sterne Superne*, 22, 39, 41)

It is interesting that in comparisons between this poem and analogues in Dante, or in Latin and Middle English lyrics, it is only the Middle English lyric which provides a similar language of absence (*I Syng of a Mayden that is Makeles*).<sup>19</sup> Dunbar goes beyond his exemplars in describing the absent. Here, Mary is not only physically untouched, but has not even been tarnished by improper sight: 'Haile, schene unseyne with carnale eyne' (*Hale, Sterne Superne*, 41). This emphasis on lack of tarnish, even by sight, supports James Kinsley's description of the poem as "a poetic analogue to paintings of the Coronation of the Virgin".<sup>20</sup> The poem represents an attempt to draw our attention to something that in its purity should not even be seen. There is thus a central irony to Dunbar's poetic description of the mother of Christ. His emphasis on the scene's *unseyne* quality speaks for the primacy of language over visual description in painting (poetry might, through language, bring us to see the unseeable). At the same time his description of virginal, unseen purity lends the poem an element of mystery. The central paradox of Mary's dual nature (virgin and mother) is reflected in the poem's catalogue of attempts to describe her. The difficulty of this task might be implied in the request that she intervene "To mak our oddis evyne" (*Hale, Sterne Superne*, 56). It is clear that Dunbar shares with

<sup>19</sup> *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley 226.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* 225.

Henryson and other medieval poets a mental association between physical beauty, or more precisely physical completeness and wholeness, and moral superiority. It is also clear, however, that where Henryson succeeds in drawing on religious imagery and seems comfortable with this religious subject, Dunbar is somewhat constrained by his subject matter. In the *Twa Mariit Wemen* the central motif is presented by the narrator from a place of hiding, and in that context it is absolutely appropriate. *Hale, Sterne Superne* is also a description of a woman whose distance from the audience is for very different reasons. The perspective in this poem is one of submission and elaborate praise. In light of his other poetry, particularly *The Flyting*, the delicate language of *Hale, Sterne Superne* is striking because it is uncharacteristic of him. Dunbar shares with Henryson and much love poetry common modes of physical description and physical longing and like others he draws on this language to describe Mary. Dunbar's poem demonstrates the inability of fallen language to describe the divine. Henryson's more limited approach proves to be more successful, in that the restrained language used is appropriate to its exalted subject. Dunbar's poem does not extend far beyond this remit. Fallen subjects, such as he finds in his contemporary social world, are much more fruitful for Dunbar and his florid language is much better suited to contexts in which he need not demonstrate restraint.

*Dunbar's Bodies Beloved*



Dunbar's love-poetry does not mark a great departure from tradition in terms of his descriptions of people in love or the bodies of those they love. He makes use of the common trope of love as an illness and of the lady as the healer in *Sweit Rois of Vertew*. Dunbar puns on *rew*, meaning pity, but also a medicinal herb:<sup>21</sup>

In to your garthe this day I did persew;  
 Thair saw I flowris that fresche wer of hew,  
 Baithe quhyte and rid, moist lusty wer to seyne,  
 And halsum herbis upone stalkis grene,  
 Yit leif nor flour fynd could I nane of rew. (*Sweit Rois of Vertew*, 6-10)

In this poem the lover finds his beloved sexually attractive, but not sexually receptive. Reciprocity is characterised by the lover as an act of pity for his longing. The florid language of the poem points to the lover's sexual needs, but this is nothing new in love-poetry, and beyond using an amusing pun there is no major innovation here. Dunbar's *Bewty and the Prisoneir* is derived from the *Romance of the Rose*, the influence of which is apparent in the language of combat and conquest:

Hir sweit having and fresche bewte  
 Has wondit me but swerd or lance  
 With her to go commandit me  
 Ontill the castell of pennance. (*Sen that I am a Presoneir*, 9-12)

Dunbar appears to survey much of the tradition of amorous poetry in his work. From the language of nature and, perhaps, practical medicine and herbals, to the language of religion and penance, Dunbar, like his predecessors and his peers,

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<sup>21</sup> Tasioulas 805. She notes that *rew* was thought to increase sexual desire in women.

borrowes the *termes* of other modes of discourse. Unlike Chaucer, however, he borrows from popular medical traditions rather than from professional discourse. It is not, in fact, clear, whether he is really borrowing from medical discourse at all, or whether he is in fact simply using, indeed repeating, the language of other poets somewhat mechanically. His conservativeness is certainly evident in this regard and in these poems. *In May as that Aurora did Up Spring* is a *debat* poem which is, again, relatively unadventurous.<sup>22</sup> We find the theme of women's beauty and their usefulness touched upon, however; the merle defends physical attraction as a right and proper source of human love:

The merle said, 'Quhy put God so grit bewte  
In ladeis with sic womanly having,  
Bot gife he wold that thay suld luvit be? (*In May as that Aurora did Up  
Spring*, 49-51)

The nightingale's formulaic response is that "All love is lost bot upon God allone". There is an allusion to the story of Onan, who was killed by God for spilling his seed on the ground rather than procreating with his late brother's wife (*Genesis*, 38:19). Here we see Dunbar touching on the use-value of female bodies (that is their sexual value). In the allusion to Onan, however, the value of male bodies in procreation is also hinted at. It is a topic to which he will return elsewhere in his poetry. His *Now Cumis Aige Quhair Yewth hes Bene* rehearses the debate between spiritual and secular love, with its rather unromantic refrain: "And trew lufe rises fro the splene"

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<sup>22</sup> Kinghorn notes, however, that this is the only Middle Scots poem that demonstrates aureate language, the language of the educated classes, and the language of peasants in the same work. A.M. Kinghorn, "The Medieval Makars," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1.1 (1959): 73.

(*Now Cumis Aige*, 2). The poem's narrator makes use of his ailing and aging body to reflect on the true nature of love. In this poem the narrator's physical degeneration is turned to his advantage: "So as the ta lufe waxis auld,/ the tothis dois increas moir kene" (*Now Cumis Aige*, 11-12). These themes appear frequently in medieval poetry and we have seen them in both Chaucer and Henryson. Dunbar's writing echoes another common body concern – the power of reason over the body. Other poets lament their declining potency through age; however, in this instance age is turned to the narrator's advantage. Physical aging is given as the cause of growing maturity and a new perspective on the relative value of the physical delights of love: "And now I sett nocht by a bene/ Hir bewty nor hir twa fair ene" (*Now Cumis Aige*, 59-60). No longer does the narrator waste time on *unquyt* love. Inevitably, the poem turns to the source of true love – the love that one can find only when one has moved beyond physical weakness, the love of God. In Chaucer's works this wisdom tends to come to the audience as guidance from some learned source, for example, Boethius. In this case Dunbar presents a narrator who can offer the same advice based, ironically, on the experience of physical decline. In the end the poem advises the reader against the pleasures of this world:

Is non but grace of God, iwis,

That can in yewth considir this.

This fals, dissavand warldis blis

So gydis man in flouris grene.

Now cumis aige quhair yewth hes bene

And trew lufe rysis fro the splene. (*Now Cumis Aige*, 87-92)

Dunbar's *Be Ye ane Luvar, Think Ye nocht Ye Suld* is a short advice poem, of the kind which would not be unfamiliar to readers of the *Secretum Secretorum* or other poetry in the advice for princes genre. By and large it extends the message of *Now Cumis Aige Quhair Yewth hes Bene* but is more like its exemplars in that it draws on an external authoritative source. The poem is distinguishable from the mainstream advice for princes genre in that its argument extends from the mores of *amor courtois* towards a universal moral rule. This is certainly not the methodology of, for example, Hoccleve's *De Regimine Principum*. One might suggest that Hoccleve relies instead on Chaucer, Boethius and the *Secreta Secretorum*. At the same time, Dunbar's *Be Ye ane Luvar* explicitly locates itself in the advice to princes genre. The poem is held together by a list of potential vices, and in this respect one might see the influence of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*.<sup>23</sup> Dunbar, however, focuses on the potential vices of a lover as they might appear in courtly love poetry rather than on the Seven deadly sins as they appear in Gower's work. Gower also considers the behaviour of lovers, indeed his poem is a lover's confession, but he is more overtly theological in his approach. As in *Hale, Sterne Superne*, Dunbar's innovation in this short poem is to introduce a new level of technical dexterity – although in this case he is far more successful. Despite the apparent reverence for the traditions of courtly love displayed in *Be Ye ane Luvar*, Dunbar's *In Secreit Place* and *My Hartis Tresure and Swete Assured Fo* both satirize the mode. With regard to bodily language, two important points are apparent from reading these poems; Dunbar is

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23 John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway, 2 vols., Middle English Texts Ser. (Kalamazoo, Mich.: TEAMS, 2004).

not afraid to interrogate playfully the relationship between body and soul in satire, and he uses very plain physical language in *In Secreit Place*.

*My Hartis Tresure* has been described as a poem that approaches hysteria in its tone.<sup>24</sup> Dunbar's poem utilizes of the motif of the lover's weary spirit and in this version lends it a colour and drama that, while apparently satirical, is still very effective:

My deathe chasis my lyfe so besalie  
 That wery is my goist to fle so fast;  
 Sic deidlie dwawmes so mischeifaislie  
 Ane hundrithe tymes hes my hairt ovirpast,  
 Me think my spreit rynnys away full gast  
 Beseikand grace on kneis yow befoir  
 Or that your man be lost for evermoir. (*My Hartis Tresure*, 15-21)

Many critics of Dunbar have pointed to his aureate language; his *anamalit* [enamelled] words. His method in this poem seems to be to amplify existing themes in the tradition, for example when his love beseeches the reader to "Behald my deidlie passioun dolorous" (29). As Kinsley has noted, we can find potential sources for the imagery of the weary spirit in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, (TC, IV. 302-3), or in James' *Kingis Quair* (st. 173). The imagery would be meaningless, however, were the tradition of love poetry not aligned with a level of mind-body dualism rooted in the language of the Bible rather than in orthodox late-medieval theological

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24 *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley 256.

doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Early in the poem the narrative voice directs its concern to the well-being of the soul itself:

O man slayar quihill saule and life dissever (*My Hartis Tresure*, 6)

The poem closes with the spectre of the disintegration of the lover's body, should his beloved not take pity on him. His tongue will fail him, his eyes will shut in pain, and death will break his heart asunder (*My Hartis Tresure*, 43-8). The poem appeals to the lady's mercy, and in doing so locates itself in the traditions of the literature of courtly love, but the power of much of the imagery is rooted in the complex web of discourses, medical and theological, that constituted the medieval understanding of the body (discussed in chapter two). Dunbar draws on this complicated tradition in much the same manner as Chaucer before him, but relies on an audience that is willing to accept mind-body dualism in a poetic context. The imagery is so vivid that it proves just as powerful for Dunbar as it had for Chaucer.

*In Secreit Place*, on the other hand, uses an altogether different kind of language to cast new light on another traditional form of love poem. Here a *chanson d'aventure* is told, but in language hardly fitting for the occasion. While *My Hartis Tresure* is amusing in its excessive melliflence, *In Secreit Place* offers a scene in which the lover and the beloved are not to be taken seriously as courtly lovers. He is clearly pursuing her to satisfy his lust rather than for the typical romantic reasons and she is as gullible as she is willing. The implication is, of course, that such alternate motivations might always exist in the reality that lies behind the conventions of all courtly love poetry. In this poem we see a dexterity with vulgarity

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25 Welton 230. For an extensive discussion of the 'Biblical Roots' of the flesh. Denigration of the body is a Greek concept, rather than being biblical in its roots, but speaking of the two as different "variations on a theme" is a biblical mode.

that is, in other places, characteristic of Dunbar's talents. We have seen the use of *termes* by unqualified speakers to comic effect in Chaucer and elsewhere; in this poem Dunbar allows his lovers some terms of courtly love, but anchors them in unsophisticated folly by attributing words to them that are plain in their physicality. His body-words are not those of the courtly poem or the learned text. See here, for example, the plain white heels juxtaposed with a word for penis, a somewhat jarring combination. The effect is startling:

Your heylis, quhyt as quhalis bane,

Garris ryis on loft my quhillelillie: (*In Secreit Place*, 33-4)

Bawcutt points out that one might expect to read *heylis* as 'neck', but in fact it is probably intended to be read, somewhat incongruously, as 'heels', as this adds to the comic effect.<sup>26</sup> The language of this poem serves to highlight the variety of body-language available to a poet in the later Middle Ages; it is noteworthy how uncommon it is to see language such as that which we find in *In Secreit Place*. Even if examples of both registers of language are available, to find them together is very rare indeed. While in *Hale, Sterne Superne* Dunbar tries to speak of the unspeakable, in this poem he makes explicit that which other poets have tended to leave out – the implied sexual conclusion of the wooing in *chansons d'aventure*. Tasioulas notes:

The lofty ideals of love are satirised as they [the lovers] babble their way to the inevitable physical conclusion, a conclusion never

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26 Priscilla Bawcutt and F. Riddy, eds., *Longer Scottish Poems*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987) 345.

mentioned by the courtly poets, and the 'lady' decides that she had better love her *sweit cowhubye* (l.58) after all.<sup>27</sup>

In the poems above, it has been apparent that Dunbar is happy to play with the norms of the poetic tradition of which he is part, but in so doing he makes it clear that he remains very much part of that tradition. His departure from Chaucer and Henryson is in his approach to the value of the body itself, that is the way his language reflects a different conception of what it is to perceive a body, or indeed to have one, or be embodied. In some respects there is a sense that where Chaucer and Henryson had some respect for human bodies, even in their disintegration, Dunbar's treatment of the subject can be more savage, more joyful, and in many ways far more democratic in the uncomfortable exposure of different bodies to the audience. This is most apparent in *The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, but before that poem can be analyzed it is important to identify how Dunbar's language treats the value of the body.

### *The Body's Value*

Dunbar's language of the body is rooted in the discourse of power. In this respect his language is entrenched in the same over-all concerns as those of his predecessors and peers. Indeed, the theoretical approach that informs much contemporary scholarship of the body would seem to imply that such a discourse of

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27 Tasioulas 809.



the body is inherent in all language of the body.<sup>28</sup> One of the best comparative studies of the body in the writing of Dunbar and Chaucer is Louise Fradenburg's analysis of the 'figured' body in Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules* and Dunbar's *Thrissill and the Rois*. According to Fradenburg "the poems differ in their approaches to political and erotic discourse; yet central to each is the mutuality of methods of power and of representation".<sup>29</sup> Fradenburg's essay examines the mechanics of subjection and sovereignty which are inscribed into the "figured bodies of their texts". Dunbar's *Thrissill and the Rois* is an occasional poem. Indeed, it is the kind of poem for which he has tended to be best remembered. Composed to mark the marriage of Margaret of England to James IV and the 'Peace of Glasgow' in 1502, the poem paints the political union as an exemplary consummation of love in the courtly style. The poem employs much symbolic language (with the thistle and the rose representing Scotland and England, respectively), a symbolic language essentially rooted in heraldic descriptions. It owes much to the *Parlement of Foules*, for example its stanza-form. The language of metaphor which dominates the poem ensures that there is little language of the body in the poem. Rather the King is presented as, at first, the Thistle (as against Margaret's Rose), and later, the lion and the eagle. Fradenburg's analysis, however, focuses on metaphor itself as a site of surplus, that is, the 'surplus Being' of the king himself:

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28 Jacques Lacan considers the ideological structures through which we develop identity. Freud, on the other hand, remains within the empirical tradition in which the subject can come to know themselves and their own body. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, The International Psychoanalytical Library 106 (London: Hogarth Press, 1977); and Sigmund Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (London: Penguin, 1995). Michel Foucault's approach is to consider the impact of social structures on power on the body itself.

29 Louise O. Fradenburg, "Spectacular Fictions: The Body Politic in Chaucer and Dunbar," *Poetics Today* 5.3 (1984): 494.

...private desires, and private bodies, are appropriated by a sovereign discourse which reads metaphor not as loss or otherness, but as surplus: the sovereign becomes the privileged site of surplus Being.<sup>30</sup>

Fradenburg's analysis rests on what she identifies as the aristocratic claim to a 'special body'. In other words the King is *so* powerful that multiple transformations of body in metaphor are possible. Multiple metaphorical analogues are necessary to encapsulate the King's potential and, indeed, potency. In the *Parlement* the aristocracy distinguishes itself as special by its capacity to defer longing – the body of the aristocrat has power in time. It is interesting to note that Dunbar is happy to use a florid vulgar tone in speaking of non-aristocratic subjects (as in *In Secreit Place*, for example), and that he also comfortably speaks of their bodies in plain terms. There is some metaphor in his descriptions of body parts, of course, but it is the everyday metaphor of speech, in which sexualised body parts are referred to by non-scientific names. In that respect these terms can hardly be called metaphorical at all. In speaking of Royalty, however, he avoids direct descriptions of body, and indeed Margaret's beauty here, and in *Now fayre, fayrest of every fayre*, is communicated by displaced description, that is, the description of the perfection of the rose as an indicator by proxy of the royal beauty. This indicates Dunbar's apparent perception that there were varying registers in speaking of the body, and that they varied according to their subjects. In both *In Secreit Place* and *The Thrissil and the Rois* he operates very much within the comfortable confines of appropriate register. We will see in *The Tua Mariit Wemen* that he can edge beyond the bounds

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30 Ibid.

of comfort in this regard, and that in many ways this makes for some of his most interesting poetry.

More than Chaucer or Henryson before him, Dunbar's work served a professional purpose; to mark special events. This creates an interesting dynamic between poet and patron. Chaucer and Dunbar each perform in the role of a poet creating artistic works for a patron. Chaucer frequently emphasised his lowly status as a poet in service to a patron, but it is clear that Chaucer was valuable to those in power for more than his poetic ability. Chaucer could emphasise his lower status as poet with confidence, because he also had various other jobs, such as Clerk of the King's works. These other roles were enough to demonstrate Chaucer's loyalty to his masters. Dunbar, however, had to portray his 'service' as poet in a manner that combined service with his explicit desire to serve, because he did not have the same level of political importance as Chaucer. This difference between the two poets is only emphasised by Chaucer's later use the traditional begging poem form in his *Complaint to his Purse*;<sup>31</sup> to some extent his later need to beg emphasises his earlier lack of need. His status, as poet rather than nobleman, had of course been lower than that of, for example, John of Gaunt, but it was not his only source of prestige and value so he could afford to be playful with it. It was only later in life that he appears to have had to call on his reputation because of serious need. Dunbar, on the other hand, was something closer to a professional poet. As a result he needed to take more seriously the task of self-positioning as a poet. Fradenburg sums up

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31 Andrew J. Finnel, "The Poet as Sunday Man: The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse," *The Chaucer Review* 8.2 (1973): 147-158. A discussion of Chaucer's begging poem, directed at Henry IV.

Dunbar's position as poet in service and the complexities attached to such a position:

Dunbar's poem is, in effect, a heraldic proclamation whose spectacular figurations of the sovereign text meet the desire of the Other... The poem in service must conceal its enslavement.<sup>32</sup>

Dunbar's strategy in *The Thrissill and the Rois* is to situate "rivalry and treason not in defeat but in repression. Debate is neither resolved nor unresolved; it is refused".<sup>33</sup>

Rather than portraying authority as something that requires confirmation or legitimation, Dunbar's poem portrays it "as given – as preceding and precluding discourse".<sup>34</sup> In one of its many similarities with religious poetry, this means that the poem treats royalty as part of the fabric of existence, rather than something that he, as poet, must set out to justify. This proves to be a powerful strategy for creating a dynamic between poet and patron that does not endanger the poet and maximises the likelihood of the patron's approval. Fradenburg argues that in *The Thrissill* Dunbar transfigures the royal wedding so that it becomes an event outside time and space. The poem represents the "rewriting of difference by absolutist discourse".<sup>35</sup> The body of the sovereign is represented in a manner that is completely different to normal representations: "the syntax of the sovereign recognizes no boundaries of self and other".<sup>36</sup> If this sounds like a description of God, then that is not by accident. Fradenburg reads Dunbar's authorial strategy as a response to problematic aspects of Chaucer's text (*The Parliament of Fowls*): "The representation of the sovereign's

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<sup>32</sup> Fradenburg 506.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 508.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 509.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

body through heraldic signifiers tries to resolve the problems raised in Chaucer's text by the representation of the hysterical body of the *finamen*<sup>37</sup> in the discourse of passionate complaint".<sup>38</sup> Essentially, Dunbar's patron is triply present in the three heraldic symbols. There are similarities to imagery of Christ, and images of Margaret of England echo the language used to describe the Virgin Mary. Fradenburg makes a strong argument for Dunbar's sense that through language he could appropriate the language of the divine and put it to the earthly purpose of advancing Scotland's ambitions:

The hymn of praise which greets the coronation of the rose, and which closes the "body" of the poem, is therefore the grand finale of the discourse of identity, the triumphant expression of Scotland's power to appropriate the virgin and of the fantasies of omnipotence which underwrite that power... whereas Chaucer's poem closes with a roundel, a secular lyric, Dunbar's closes with an elaborate hymn sung in parts by a full choir of birds and flowers. In the *Thrissill and the rois* closure is achieved through the totalizations of the absolutist discourse of identity – through the one voice that speaks for all.<sup>39</sup>

Dunbar's poem begins with descriptions of the body regal and closes with a representation of the body politic. The overall effect is one of harmonious joy in the King and Queen's union. Compare Dunbar's praise of Margaret with *Hale, Sterne Superne*, above:

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37 Fradenburg glosses *finamen*: Suffering from what styles itself as real illness - as somatic disorder - the *finamen* is a body, a voice, transformed by negativity, reversed, no longer recognizable. The voice of the *finamen* utters its own unworthiness to speak, loudly proclaims its inability to speak of itself," 500.

38 Fradenburg 511.

39 Ibid 513.

Thane all the birdis song with voce on hicht,

Quhois mirthfull soun was mervelus to heir:

The mavys song, 'Haill Rois most riche and richt...

.....

Quhois pretius vertew is imperiall'...

.....

The merle scho sang, Haill Rois of most delyt...

.....

The lark scho sang, Haill Rois both reid and quhyt...

.....

The nychtingaill song, Haill Naturis suffragene... (*The Thrissil and the*

*Rois*, 162-64, 168, 169, 171, 173)

Fradenburg's study serves to emphasise an important point – the centrality of the body in the poetics of service. Her remarks are worth quoting at length:

In the late medieval text, the poetics of service and of sovereignty depend upon figuration – upon techniques of bodily representation. For at the heart of the relation between sovereign and poet, between master and servant, is the question of Being, and therefore of the Body. Through the figured body both monarch and poet lay claim to, and are claimed by, discourses of power. Thus in Chaucer's poem the absence of an absolute sovereign – the imperfection of a body politic from which Reason, as Nature remarks, is missing – facilitates the representation of bodily and poetic "replicacioun," of rivalry and its

frustrations. It correspondingly facilitates a pluralized, parliamentary discourse – a debate among “independent drives, private desires, alternative texts. In Dunbar’s poem, the replication of bodies yields to the representation of a surplus body of power and of univocal discourse. The metaphors of the pleasure-ego are appropriated as the exclusive privilege of sovereignty, so that no predication is possible without reference to the sovereign; no voice speaks that does not speak the voice of this privileged Other. Yet in speaking the univocity of sovereign power, the body of the text ends in paralysis, collapsing of its own phonic weight... To speak for the prince ends by revealing the impossibility of a sovereign discourse.<sup>40</sup>

Fradenburg’s analysis reveals a poet who is both sophisticated in his understanding of the relative value of bodies (for example, his body as poet, the body of the king, and the body of the queen), who has a concern for how these values are portrayed in poetry, and who is concerned as to whether poetry’s portrayal of the relative value of bodies can reflect or influence extra-textual reality. Many of Dunbar’s poems reflect a concern with the disparity between appearance and reality in poetry and amongst bodies in poetry. If Fradenburg identifies in rivalry and frustration an analogue for a parliamentary system (as opposed to a monarchical system), then Dunbar’s other poems might better represent the natural disagreements and oppositions of life as lived by the upper classes. With Chaucer, and with Henryson in particular, physical appearance tends to be a faithful indicator of the moral

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40 Ibid 515-16.

character of a figure in poetry. Dunbar explicitly explores ways in which this can be untrue, and he seems to enjoy creating characters who fall below the audience's expectations. This will have a profound effect on the relative value of bodies in poetry, as questions are raised about appearance and reality, and what types of value we ascribe to bodies (particularly female bodies).

### *The Poet's Own Body*

If Dunbar creates bodies that fall below the standards of the imagined ideal, then the first to disappoint is his own. Dunbar allows his own body to intrude on the fiction of the poetry in *My Heid did Yak Yester Nicht*. It seems that in this poem the poet draws on the same likely audience empathy, although in this case the pain being suffered is either real or is at least fictionalized on the basis of his personal experience. Essentially a pleading poem, this poem describes the poet's experience of head pain (or a migraine). It almost certainly describes a 'migraine' as we understand it, with his physical symptoms matching those commonly associated with migraine even today: headache, sensitivity to light, and a 'dullness' of thought.<sup>41</sup> The poem is a technical achievement. On the one hand it is a petition to the listener, seeking sympathy for his predicament and forgiveness that Dunbar cannot produce poetry on demand because of his condition. As an occasional poet, Dunbar may have seen his own craft in productive terms – he would make poetry

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41 "A severe headache which characteristically affects only one side of the head and is typically preceded or accompanied by visual or other neurological disturbances and is associated with nausea and vomiting; (also) a syndrome characterized by the recurrence of such headaches". "migraine, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. 2002, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 25 June 2010, <<http://oed.com>>.



when it was requested. As such, to be unable to produce poetry because of illness would be a matter of shame, or at least a professional failure. Other audiences might be more accustomed to think of the value of poetry as being located in the text alone, in a sense 'outside time'. Poets often encourage such a view of poetry<sup>42</sup>. In practice, however, poetry is rarely judged on such lofty terms. The poet's experience of production must take into account the audience's immediate needs, and of course Dunbar's concern in this poem, time-pressure. It is rare indeed for the audience to be presented with the physical well-being of the poet as a factor in the poem's production. Here Dunbar locates himself in the production of the text, and in doing so grounds the text in physical concerns and signals that it is an artifact, a produced work.

Nonetheless, one might expect the poem to have provided some pleasure for its audience – there is a pleasant irony to Dunbar's production of a poem to explain that he cannot write poetry. The poet's physical description of the migraine, however, is convincing:

So sair the magryme dois me menyie,

Perseing my brow as ony ganyie,

That scant I luik may on the licht. (*My Heid did Yak Yester Nicht*, 3-5)

The poem also offers insight into Dunbar's concept of the relationship between his physical body and his thought – he knows the anatomy of the head and describes his inspiration as being “unsleipit in my heid behind” (9). It is unrefreshed by sleep in his memory (his memory being the third cell at the back of the ventricles). Note that

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42 Shakespeare's Sonnet 123 is just one of many available examples. William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (London: W. W. Norton, 1997).

in describing his mental pain in such physical terms, he echoes Chaucer's description of the *lovenes maladye of Hereos and manye* in the *Knight's Tale* (l. 1376). This is an unusual physical description of the poetic process. Again it grounds the process of poetic production in a physical process. In this case an anatomical failure (the migraine) interferes with the production of art. The poet's voice is predicated by the poet's body.

*"To syle men of treuth": Appearance and Deception in 'The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo'*

According to James Kinsley's headings in his collection of Dunbar's poetry, *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* is a 'poem of love'. This seems a somewhat ironic description – it is a poem of many loves, perhaps, but in this poem the love-experience of each of these three women is evaluated in the cold light of day, and they do not hesitate to discuss their shortcomings. Kinsley sees in this poem "Dunbar's experimental interest in developing a comic contrast between a conventional form and a freshly chosen theme".<sup>43</sup> The conventional form in question is the *debat d'amour* (the *debat* form is also explored in the *Merle and the Nychtingall*, although not the *debat d'amour*), and his "freshly chosen theme" is "the realities of the sexual relationship".<sup>44</sup> To some extent the "realities of the sexual relationship" had been explored before, for example in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Tasioulas notes this relationship but remarks that "Chaucer... cannot

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<sup>43</sup> *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley 259.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid* 259.

prepare us for the venom we find in Dunbar's work".<sup>45</sup> Tasioulas also notes the disagreement this poem has produced:

Some critics believe that Dunbar himself is writing in the anti-feminist tradition and is revealing the true feminine horror which belies the golden hair and beautiful faces. Others, however, point out that men are reduced to the level of beasts in the poem and argue that Dunbar may be in fact be revealing the horror of a world in which marriages are dictated by financial considerations and love is confined to a literary genre which allows women no feelings and men no ultimate success.<sup>46</sup>

In this reading both of these perspectives are valid. On the one hand it does seem that Dunbar is showing us a terrible reality that the audience might have suspected exists just beneath the surface of the *debat* fiction. Women are no longer two-dimensional objects of male affection, existing only in so much as they can be loved by men. Rather they are cynical, manipulative and resentful. Furthermore, some of the audience might be shocked that these women do not enjoy all of the attentions of their male lovers, and that they have their own reasons for accepting them. It is hard to argue that an anti-feminist could not find what he or she was looking for in this scenario. On the other hand, men are as beasts in this imagined female discourse. One could suggest that men are nothing like this in reality, but rather this image of men is the product of female self-interest and corruption. On the other hand it is clear that men must pay attention to this female discourse, since their

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<sup>45</sup> Tasioulas 806.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 806-807.

perceptions of male behaviour might prove to be telling. Hence this might be rather an embarrassing poem for a male audience and in some ways rather titillating for a female audience. Dunbar's talent is not to provide clear answers as to where his opinion lies on the matter, but rather he seems to enjoy creating discomfort with his poetry. This story is unsettling for its audience, both male and female, and it forces them to confront aspects of reality that most existing poetic fictions encouraged them to disregard and that they might prefer to ignore.

Dunbar borrows a common conceit from his predecessors in *The Tretis*; the poet is in a garden, and seeing three women in conversation, he hides nearby in order to listen to them. The poem establishes the scene as a significant moment in his opening lines:

Apon the Midsummer Evin, mirriest of nichtis,  
 I muvit furth allane in meid as midnicht wes past  
 Besyd ane gudlie grein garth, full of gay flouris  
 Hegeit of ane huge hicht with hawthorne treis  
 Quhairon ane bird on ane bransche so birst out hir notis  
 That never ane blythfullar bird was on the beuche hard. (*The Tretis*, 1-6)

The description of the formalized garden (mis)leads the audience to have expectations of the tale they are about to hear, based on the literature to which they are used. Dunbar's technique has a certain cruelty to it – this scene pokes fun at its audience, and what follows implies that this is not being done in a gentle manner. The narrator “drew in” to the nearest “dyk”, and then pushed in on the “hege”. This

conceit allows the male narrator, the male poet, and in a sense the male audience (and the female audience who are complicit in male-oriented romance traditions) to intrude on the privacy of the “thre gay ladeis.../ All grathit in to garlandis of fresche gudlie flouris” (17-18). This is a very different perspective on women to that in Dunbar's other poems. In the poems discussed above women, whether divine woman in Mary, or human (although elevated) woman in *The Thrissil and the Rois*, are presented as if on display to the audience. Here in *The Tretis* we view these women from the perspective of interlopers – the poem promises the audience a far more intimate view and gives the audience a far more flawed image of woman than either of the two other poems mentioned could ever offer. What is more, this poem provides (an imaginary) voice for women. Nancy Partner notes that all too often the reader has access not to medieval women, but to medieval women as imagined by men:

In far too many ways the women whom medieval historians have to study are the imaginative constructions of men: the theoretical women of medical, philosophic, legal, and religious literature; the women seen as the property of masters, fathers, husbands; the women fantasized by poets, romancers, preachers, hagiographers.<sup>47</sup>

In Dunbar's poem, however, the reader is instead exposed to medieval men as a male poet imagined them to be perceived by women. This allows for men's bodies to be discussed in new and interesting ways, and in ways which direct the gaze of the audience from the bodies of women to the bodies of men. In Dunbar's other poetry

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47 Partner 419-44.

we experience the male gaze as an audience – in *The Tretis* Dunbar imagines the female voice, and in so doing directs us to see men through the female gaze.

*The Tretis* is not the first poem to allow access to women's voices or to a female discussion. One need to only look to Boccaccio's *Decameron* for a clear example of such a conceit. Nor is it the first poem to imagine the male interloper intruding on the female world of the garden – the *Roman de la Rose* is an archetypal example of such a narrative. *The Tretis* is unusual, however, in its merging of these two literary games, and it marks a departure in both techniques. On the one hand, the male interloper traditionally entered the garden in order to fulfill a conventional desire – the male conquest of his female beloved. In the *Roman* the garden stands for the female domain, and the characters the lover meets represent obstacles in his path and help along the way. In the *Tretis* no such metaphor is implied by the garden. Here, the narrator enters the garden as a means of access to the female voice, providing a logical reason for our hearing the female voices. Elsewhere, as in the *Decameron*, no reason is given and the garden is simply an expression of private female space. Furthermore, in the *Roman de la Rose*, the male who enters the garden has an active part to play – the poem centres around *his* love, *his* conquest. In the *Tretis* our attention is drawn elsewhere, towards the loves of the women. As a consequence the *Tretis* marks a significant shift, from male lovers as protagonists to female characters as active protagonists (albeit discursively recollecting their earlier actions). The female voices we hear also differ from those of the *Decameron* – here they tell the stories of their own love, and the attitudes they represent contrast dramatically with the expectations that the audience might bring to the poem based

on the physical descriptions of the ladies. Whereas in other poems the veil of female privacy is lifted to reveal the kind of feminine world that men might like to believe exists, in this poem the reality is a nightmare for the male audience, and an embarrassment for the female audience. In essence, this poem distinguishes itself because it marks a departure in the ways in which women are allowed to speak of men. In its predecessors, while the audience supposedly hears stories told in the voices of women, it remains apparent that they are being told within a male discursive domain.

The court of love is presided over by the *Wedo* herself. From the outset the voice of authority in this poem is a female voice. Her *demande* to each of the other two *wemen* allows them to discuss their marriages and give their opinions on men. The *wedo* then tells her story (the most experienced voice being given the last word amongst the women). The poem ends with the narrator's own *demande d'amour*: "Quhilk wald ye waill to your wif, gif ye suld wed one?" (530). This sudden return to the male voice is jarring, because the audience has been immersed in a female discursive space, but this will be considered in further detail later. The poem satirizes the conventions of courtly love effectively, and in doing so breaks down one of the fundamental assumptions of the romance tradition: that appearances reflect the character of the individual. In this poem, appearance and reality are deliberately set at odds with each other. The audience is introduced to the poem in a garden of love and there is no reason to suspect that it will diverge from traditional romance themes. The ladies are described in flattering terms which emphasize their physical beauty:

Kemmit war their cleir hair and curiouslie sched  
 Attour thair schulderis doun schyre, schyning ful bricht,  
 With curches cassin thair abone of kirsp cleir and thin.  
 Thair mantillis grein war ar the gress that grew in May sessoun,  
 Fetrit with thair quhyt fingaris about thair fair sydis. (*The Tretis*, 21-  
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Dunbar's *anamlit* language is in evidence here. He follows conventional modes of description, from their bright straight long hair to their white skin, with their clothes being compared to the beauty of nature. Dunbar's alliterative language locates the poem within the romance tradition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, amongst other poems (for example *curched cassin... kirsp cleir*). The conceit of the poem, which is not in itself unconventional, allows for an alternative view of the ladies to be presented, one that goes beyond their physical appearance. Through the narrator's ear we hear their conversation, and it is here that they are revealed to be something other than the courteous ladies that they impersonate, or that a male audience might assume them to be. One could argue that this perspective is always available in any text in which we hear female voices, but Dunbar's language as he introduces his narrative conceit appears to emphasize the narrator's role as interloper. After all, he "drew in derne to the dyk to dirkin" (9). The poem holds up the promise of lifting the veil – in a sense that veil is lifted literally, as much of the ladies' self-presentation as courteous respectable characters is created through clothing and fashioning of the appearance. Part of the power afforded to them by their duplicitous nature is achieved through mastery over the appearance of their



own bodies. Burrow notes that they outdo Chaucer's Wife of Bath in unveiling marital secrets.<sup>48</sup> The poem is somewhat disturbing because the women's voices do not fit our expectations of them based on their physical description and the behaviour of ladies so described elsewhere. The common expectation that physical appearance should match character is here subverted. Spearing's argument that what we find in this poem are the "damaging consequences of the contradictory attitudes towards women" is worth consideration.<sup>49</sup> At the level of the narrator, this poem may tell the story of the damage male attitudes towards women do to men, not just the damage they do to women. Just as an audience of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* has to be aware that the narrator himself might not be a trustworthy representation of the 'reality' of the authorial perspective, so Dunbar's reader must keep in mind that his narrator here may be a naive narrator of sorts. The narrator betrays rather misogynistic attitudes towards women. It may be that the poet has created a fictional voice for the narrator, just as he has created fictional voices for his female characters. One might interject here that such a perspective is symptomatic of a modern reader's desire to impose on Dunbar a more sophisticated perspective than the misogyny displayed by his narrator. The notion that Dunbar himself had a vision beyond this might be seen as wishful thinking. In this reading it is argued that Dunbar appears to create a scenario in which even his narrator does not look good in the eyes of the audience. If the narrator is Dunbar, then he represents an aspect of Dunbar's own personality that he wished implicitly to

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48 J.A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work: Middle English Literature and its Background 1100-1500* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) 143.

49 Spearing, 1993, 253.

critique. The poem is not composed without self-awareness. Whatever the case in this regard, the poem has excited critical attention – perhaps largely because of the “double vision” apparent in its descriptions of the women.<sup>50</sup> Dunbar allows his audience to maintain simultaneous positive and negative attitudes towards women, and the poem serves to highlight the existence of such attitudes rather than attempting to change them.

If the *Roman de la Rose* is a story of male desire, the *Tretis* is very much a story of female desire. Whereas the *Roman* is a story of idealized desire, however, the *Tretis* undercuts that ideal. It is a cynical story. Female physical longing is not absent from medieval poetry, but it is largely a matter of hearsay – the dangers of female longing are described by male speakers. When framed positively, female desire is usually constructed as a decision to accept male attention, rather than an active decision along the lines of male desire. Female lasciviousness is always at two removes from the audience – its distance renders it all the more exotic, and all the more threatening. Here in the *Tretis* one degree of separation is removed since we hear about female desire, supposedly from women’s own mouths. This has the double effect of rendering their desire more shocking, in its novel description, but also more accessible, more human, and perhaps more comprehensible since we can now see beyond the desire itself to the actual characters who experience it. Because the audience hears about female desires from women, it is exposed to a matrix of interrelated concerns, including security and broader emotional happiness. Dunbar simultaneously condemns and humanizes his subjects. This female desire remains

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50 Burrow 1982, 144.

an imagined hunger – it comes to us, after all, through the ears of a male narrator and of course from the imagination of a male poet. It has an element of shocking realism, however, when compared to the female desire condemned by moralistic writers, because it is presented not just as desire alone, but as a spectrum of female reactions to their male lovers. Desire is coupled with its antithesis, disgust, to present female protagonists who do not just blindly want sexual relations, but also make value judgments about the men who they observe. These women are allowed sophisticated degrees of choice. As I have shown elsewhere, male poets were capable of descriptions of women, but they were rarely multi-dimensional. They could describe the blessed virgin, the lascivious whore, the beloved mother, the ugly crone, and of course the beautiful, virginal, yet potentially accessible, beloved of romance. Rarely are women described with much depth, particularly with regard to how they perceive men and how they choose or accept a mate. Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* and *Troilus and Criseyde* are much read precisely because they stand out in this respect. *The Tretis* is another poem that reveals unusual depth in its treatment of female desire and in its depiction of a female gaze, a gaze that to the 'male' audience may be both shocking and horrifying, since the beloved has now become the lover, and consequently the active male is submitted to an examination normally reserved for the female object of male desire.

The poem presents a rather negative view of marriage, at least from the perspective of the widow. Her *demande d'amour* is framed in terms which immediately betray her own negative views; she describes marriage as "that rackles conditioun" (43). While she acknowledges that there is *mirth* (42) to be found in

marriage, she asks whether the other women had loved another more than “thane that 3e 3our fayth hes festinit for ever” (45), or whether given the choice again, they “wald cheis better” (46). The women then provide their responses, and we are quickly presented with a litany of negative descriptions of men. These descriptions vary in their precise complaints, but they centre around two fundamental failings: the physical appearance of the men and their lack of prowess in bed. Dunbar must find a language in which to term these complaints – he cannot simply borrow the language of blame associated with male descriptions of women, since the corresponding positive descriptions do not match. What is thought of as becoming in a woman is not necessarily so in a man, and likewise women’s perceived failings are not those of men. The language that Dunbar chooses for his female complainants tells us much about his attitudes to female desire. Since their complaints are so physical in nature, one can assume that Dunbar is happy to accept that female desire is realized, like male desire, in physical longing, and is focused on the body of the object of desire. Where men’s descriptions of women’s bodies tend to construct them as static objects of desire, however, Dunbar’s women focus both on male bodies and on the utility value of their bodies. Dunbar presents male bodies as having value both in their static state, and in their quality of sexual performance.

Male descriptions of female beauty in the Middle Ages use a vocabulary of purity. Consequently male descriptions of female ugliness tend towards a vocabulary of corruption. This does transfer to descriptions of male beauty and ugliness in some respects. However, male desire is framed rather differently to female desire in most texts. It is precisely that physical beauty on which texts tend

to focus, in their descriptions of attractive women. This beauty is coupled with an abstract notion of purity, a purity that in the medieval mind is generally apparent in physical appearance. Beautiful men are also described – where women have comely garments, men are given shining armour, or lustrous hair. Usually they are ascribed a sort of Christian purity which is in some ways parallel to the purity associated with some women, although rather different in its implications. Attractive men, however, are frequently described in terms of their strength, their power, and their usefulness – where women are distinguished by their looks, men are distinguished by their actions, or at least so one would conclude from reading medieval texts. The qualities that Dunbar chooses as important in men for his female characters, then (in appearance *and* utility), are probably informed by this romance paradigm. Of course ugly men and evil men are very often described in other texts, but Dunbar is searching for a language to describe men who are unremarkable – they are neither beautiful hero nor hideous anti-hero. Rather, they are simply disappointing husbands, and since we hear this kind of female voice so little in medieval texts, we hear little of this (presumably not terribly uncommon) phenomenon.

Men's physical shortcomings are described in two ways. On the one hand, the standard language of corruption is used. On the other hand, language which in the female context might appear positive is used negatively in the male context, particularly with regard to descriptions of the penis, or to other areas that should exude strength and hardness rather than gentleness and softness. Both types of negative description are used in the first respondent's description of her husband:

I have ane wallidrag, ane worme, ane auld wobat carle,

A waistit wolroun na worth bot wourdis to clatter,  
 Ane bumbart, ane dron bee, ane bag full of flewme,  
 Ane scabbit skarth, ane scorioun, ane scutarde behind.  
 To se him scart his awin skyn grit scunner I think.  
 Quhen kisis me that carybald, than kyndillis all my sorow –  
 As birs of ane brym bair his berd is als stif,  
 Bot soft and soupill as the silk is his sary lume –  
 He may weill to the syn assent, bot sakles is his deidis. (*The Tretis*, 89-97)

This passage is rich in descriptive language. The language of corruption suits the woman's disgust well, though it has a precedent in men's descriptions of men whom they despise. In this description that which should be soft (the beard) is stiff, and that which should be stiff (the *lume*, or penis) is soft. There is an existing paradigm for how men's bodies *should* be, and in order to express discontent with her husband the first respondent need only show how his physical features are, in fact the opposite of the ideal features. In this poem we hear a man speak of a woman, yet one need only look to Dunbar's *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* for a parallel description of a man's shortcomings, but one that in this case comes from the perspective of another man:

Thow Lazarus, thow laithly lene tramort,  
 To all the world thow may example be  
 To luk upoun thy grislie peteous port;  
 For hiddowis, haw and holkit is thyne ee,

Thy chekebane bair, and blaiknit is thy ble;

Thy choip, thy choll, garris men for to leif chest

Thy gane, it garris us think that we mon de:

I conjure the, thow hungart Heland gaist. (*Flyting*, 161-69)

Note that both descriptions focus on dermatological problems: the *Flyting* calls Kennedie a *lazarus* (a leper); the *Tretis* speaks of the husband scratching his scabbed skin and the disgust this causes in his wife. Both poems share one particular type of negative description in the association between an ugly body and animality. Animal comparisons in the *Flyting* will be discussed later, but in passages reminiscent of the *Flyting* men are described as *scarth* (92) or as suffering from *farcy* (114), a disease normally suffered by horses. Carole Rawcliffe notes that, despite our contemporary critical focus on fragmentation and ‘otherness’, medieval people had more fundamental reasons for focusing their disgust on disfigurement, particularly facial disfigurement:

Unless they were reduced to beggary and dressed in rags, medieval men and women displayed very little flesh in public. The face thus became a prime focus of attention, being widely regarded as a mirror of health, temperament, and probity.<sup>51</sup>

Public descriptions of male disgust in other men, then, can be expected to focus on the other man’s face, rather than his body. For a man to describe another man’s body, even in terms of disgust, might lead the speaker into dangerous territory. Rawcliffe’s argument lends a new significance to the first wife’s complaint about her

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51 Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006) 197.

husband's *soft and souple ... sary lume*. Whereas in the *Flyting* the opponents naturally focus on negative descriptions of those bodily parts most readily apparent, dominated of course by the face, here the wife's intimacy with her husband allows for a new level of negative description not available to a male speaker. Dunbar's co-option of the female voice allows for a fundamentally different type of physical description. Descriptions of men's bodies (by male authors) are normally framed within the existing paradigm of male-male relations. The male author can only describe men through a man's eyes. If one thinks of physical description as a set of answers to a series of questions extending from the initial question 'what does the person look like?', then it becomes apparent that men and women are likely to ask different questions of men's bodies. For example, we would not normally expect a medieval male author to speak of men's bodies in terms of their sexual usefulness, since this is not his concern, or if it is his concern we can expect it to be a taboo subject, absent (perhaps even conspicuously absent) from the text.

One way Dunbar could have characterised these female voices would have been simply by borrowing the discourse of men. We might expect attractive men to be described as attractive in the same terms in which women are described by men. Conversely one might expect ugly men to be described in ways that might as easily be used to describe ugly women. To a limited extent this happens – after all dermatological descriptions, here used to describe the disappointing husband, are also found in negative descriptions of women, for example in Henryson's description of Cresseid. Dunbar's approach to the female analysis of men is rather more sophisticated than this, however. He does not simply voice female



dissatisfaction with men as if they themselves were men analyzing 'feminized' male subjects. Rather, he appears to imagine a female voice (or set of voices) based on the different modes of desire he associates with them. As such, men are assessed on the terms not of medieval men, but rather on the terms of the 'Dunbar-woman'. One might suggest that the characteristics of this woman are also a list of common medieval stereotypes about women. While there may be some truth to this, Dunbar at least combines these characteristics to create depth of character. His imagined women are characterized according to medieval male assumptions, but he allows those characters to develop in ways that misogynystic texts do not usually allow. Stereotypical females are not normally given so much space to develop unique voices capable of stirring empathy in the audience. Dunbar-woman is essentially the embodiment of female imagination and identity as he apparently envisaged it. Dunbar-woman has a number of readily identifiable characteristics. These have much in common with women and assumptions about women as described in many other medieval texts, and the list itself is not groundbreaking. The features below might apply as easily to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and indeed critics frequently note the two poets' similar approaches to strong women. The Wife of Bath is herself principally derived from La Vieille and Le Jaloux in the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>52</sup> Lee Patterson argues that "La Vieille and the Wife of Bath function in their respective poems as both agents and paradigms of resolution".<sup>53</sup> Dunbar's women are descended from these archetypal candid women. Dunbar's novelty of approach,

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52 Dean S. Fansler, *Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose* (New York: Columbia UP, 1914) 168-174.

53 Lee Patterson, "'For the Wyves love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Speculum* 58.3 (1983): 659.

aside from the new perspective on women's private conversation not generally found in the French fabliaux (in which attitudes are communicated directly to the audience), lies in his use of these assumptions about women. The major difference between Dunbar's women and the Wife of Bath is that Alys appears to have little concern even for the appearance of piety. Her prologue and tale take as candid an approach as Dunbar's women, but in the latter case they do so in the conceit of a private female space. These characteristics are:

1. Concern for their own physical appearance
2. Concern for appearance of piety
3. Despite concern for appearance, willingness to admit duplicity in conversation with other women, and trust in the 'female space'
4. Focus on female choice of mate, rather than female acceptance of male mate-choice
5. Feelings of sexual desire based on male virility (largely their sexual *utility* rather than their appearance, or at least rather than their appearance alone)
6. Desire for wealth
7. Awareness of their own power to attract men
8. Share sense of humour about men and sexual relationships

Dunbar-woman then, is a complex creature, and is not framed in particularly positive terms, or at least not the uncomplicated positivity of standard romance accounts of beloved women. On the other hand these women are not described in singularly negative terms, and neither do they meet romance expectations of bad

women, such as the hag, for example.<sup>54</sup> One might argue that Dunbar speaks for the women in a voice that betrays his own misogynistic attitudes, and it seems difficult to argue otherwise. For an audience that shares the attitudes of Chaucer's merchant ("She is a shrewe at al" *MT* 1222), for example, many of the lady's negative traits, as they perceive them, are both recognizable and predictable. But, while Dunbar creates his female characters in familiar terms, he does not merely create two-dimensional targets for male criticism. The list above covers their motivations as active characters within the tale, and Dunbar uses the *Tretis* to explore what it is that women want from men. As such he provides Dunbar-woman with the needs and desires that he apparently imagines women to have, and once he has created these characters, he is true to them. In the *Tretis* the women are consistently modeled on these characteristics. Furthermore Dunbar, while not exactly sympathetic, treats the women with integrity; his exploration of their desires is true to the characteristics he has given them. As such, one might describe Dunbar's treatment of the three women as, if not sympathetic, certainly empathetic.

As a result, each of the characteristics listed above becomes comprehensible to an audience willing to share Dunbar's empathy for their social situation. Nevertheless it has much entertainment value for an audience that wants misogynistic descriptions of women. While this reading interprets Dunbar's descriptions of the women as relatively sympathetic, they are easily interpreted otherwise, and in a sense this is part of the poem's power. The ladies' concern for

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54 *The Wedding of Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* provides a near-contemporary English example, and Morgan le Fay appears as a loathly lady in *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Thomas, Hahn ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Mich. University, 1995).

physical appearance is linked to their knowledge of their sexual power over men. Their willingness to admit their duplicity (that is, the disparity between their appearance and their true motivations) amongst other women is a reflection of the desires and needs they have in common. Their focus on the importance of female choices with regard to the selection of a mate reflects the fundamental importance of such choices on the outcome and experience of their lives, and the actual limitations on choice imposed on them: "Or gif ye think, had ye chois, that ye wald cheis better" (*The Tretis* 46). Most of their complaints about men, after all, are largely related to their relative lack of power in the mating process. Their attention to male sexual virility is relatively unusual, but considered as an element of broader attitudes to men as apparent in medieval texts, it is not, in fact surprising. Men are often, after all, described positively in terms of their strength and power. This text's innovation is in its use of the same markers of strength and power to create negative descriptions of men.

Dunbar is able to imagine legitimate reasons for the women's lack of desire for their men. Apart from his unattractiveness, the first wife has other reasons for finding her husband distasteful, and she expresses her physical discomfort at his attentions:

I schrenk for the scharp stound, bot schout dar I nought  
 For schore of that auld schrew, schame him betide. (*The Tretis*, 109-10)

He is not simply unattractive, but also menacing. A large part of his failure as a husband is the relative imbalance between his physical strength (which clearly

presents a threat) and his lack of strength in bed ("his sary lume"). His male strength is misdirected in the relationship, away from sexual potency and towards sexual violence. He clearly distrusts her:

He is sa full of jelusy and engyne fals,

Ever ymagynyng in mynd materis of evill... (*The Tretis*, 121-22)

He is consumed by jealousy, although the ironic result is that she is, indeed, dissatisfied with him and his sexual performance. Yet at the same time he cannot himself fulfil her sexual needs:

For he is waistit and worne fra Venus werkis

And may nought beit worth a bene in bed of my mystirs. (*The Tretis*, 127-28)

Her choice of words above is particularly interesting. Again sexual utility, even worth, is used as a marker of men's value as a mate. Whereas in other texts the female body is ascribed value according to its beauty and purity (women's bodies lose value to men if they are not virgins), here men's bodies are ascribed value in terms of their ability to function correctly. The acknowledgement that women might think in these terms is very unusual. There are examples of old men lamenting *their own* loss of sexual function (including a possible source for this particular passage).<sup>55</sup> It is a commonplace to note that love literature all too often ends with the conquest of the lady; rarely is men's anxiety about their own ability to carry out the proposed conquest acknowledged. The audience that has been exposed to Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, mentioned above, might again find much that is familiar

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<sup>55</sup> Kinsley notes Maitland Quarto MS, f.27: "Of Venus play past is the heit/ For I may not the misteris beit/ Of Meg nor Mald; /For ane young lass I am not meit /For I am sa auld". *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. James Kinsley 267.

in this account of female sexual choice. Dunbar's ladies behave in accordance with the Merchant's expectations of women, and indeed one would expect that, given the choice, they would follow May in choosing the young Damyan over the "oold and hoor" (IV. 1269) Januarie. One might also suggest that Dunbar's ladies would also have some sympathy for May's comment to Januarie that further infidelity might follow:

"But, sire, a man that waketh out of his sleep,  
 He may nat sodeynly wel taken keep  
 Upon a thyn, ne seen it parfitly,  
 Til that he be adawed verrailly.  
 Right so a man that longe hath blynd ybe,  
 Ne may nat sodeynly so wel yse,  
 First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn,  
 As he that hath a day or two yseyn.  
 Til that youre sighte ysatled be a while  
 Ther may ful many a sighte yow begile.  
 Beth war, I prey yow, for by hevene kyng,  
 Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng,  
 And it is al another than it semeth.  
 He that mysconcevyth, he mysdemeth. (IV. 2396-2410)

If May's closing words are misunderstood by Januarie, they are not misunderstood by the audience. There is a clear warning that she may be unfaithful in the future. While Chaucer leaves this as a possibility for the audience, Dunbar's poem functions

as a way of opening its eyes as if, like Januarie, they have been blind. In giving the audience an insight into the private world of female secrets, he demonstrates that the Merchant's suspicions are based on a strong foundation. It is likely that Dunbar's ladies certainly would continue to be unfaithful, were Januarie their husband. While Chaucer's Merchant places the blame on the woman herself, Dunbar's poem at least attempts to give an account of the reasons a *fresshe* woman might choose a younger man. Dunbar's *Flyting*, discussed below, hints, in men's abuse of other men, that men's lack of attractiveness to women might be a fundamental male concern. Dunbar unveils not just the imagined psyche of his female subjects, but also something of the psyche of the male audience. In pulling back the veil of female privacy, he also exposes the anxieties of men. He creates discomfort, and his female voices redirect the male gaze back upon itself. Dunbar develops the metaphor of worth in the lines which follow:

Yit leit I nevir that larbar my leggis ga betwene

To fyle my flesche na fummyll me without a fee gret.

And thocht his pene purly me payis in bed

His purse pays richely in recompense efter... (*The Tretis*, 133-136)

Here a direct equivalence between sex and money is created. Her man cannot pay her in bed, so he pays her from his purse instead. Hardly a compassionate moment from Dunbar, but nonetheless an acknowledgement that his female character's needs are not being met and that she too can develop strategies to achieve her aims. She is not a passive female object; rather she has negotiated a position (albeit an imperfect one) within her existing circumstances. Nonetheless, despite her

negotiated position, the *belyf* remains unhappy with her situation. She feels it is a price dearly paid: “Me think the baid deir aboucht, sa bawch ar his werkis” (143). This female character is not an uncomplicated victim of male sexual aggression. In her speech she essentially constructs herself as a woman who trades sex for material worth. It seems likely that she certainly would not frame herself in this manner were she aware of a male audience, as in that case it is likely she would immediately be labeled a prostitute. In the relative comfort of a supposed female audience, however, she is happy to speak about the compromises she has had to make in her relationship. This character has a precedent in Chaucer’s *Shipman’s Tale*. This tale belongs to the “lover’s gift regained” type, with the closest analogues in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* 8.1 and 8.2. *Le Bouchier d’Abeville* is the closest French analogue.<sup>56</sup> Chaucer’s invention, however, is to alter the wife’s actions at the end of the story. Rather than becoming a victim of the complex web of deceit woven when a monk visits her merchant husband and convinces her to sleep with him, she resolves matters by deceiving her husband in turn. The monk borrows money from her husband to give her in return for sex. When he leaves he tells the merchant that he gave the money to her in repayment, and she tells her husband that she had assumed it was a gift in return for the monk’s long stay and that all the money had already been spent. She repays her husband in bed, again using her sexuality to meet her immediate needs (VII. 400-426). It is clear then, that in creating a female character with a pragmatic approach to sex, Dunbar is following Chaucer’s example. Again, however, Dunbar uses *The Tretis* to allow the woman to speak in the first

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56 Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds., *The Literary Context of Chaucer’s Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (Indianapolis: Bob Merrill, 1971) 282-311.



person, although this is less of an innovation here since Chaucer's merchant's wife also speaks in the first person.

It is also worth noting the extraordinarily graphic nature of the language used. Initially it seems that she is speaking metaphorically, but her apparent metaphor become literal (as he actually gives her wealth). The physical act of sex is not described metaphorically ("quhen that caribald carll wald clyme one my wambe"), and again because she is comfortable with her (supposedly small) audience, she can speak openly about matters that are normally veiled in symbolism. Again Dunbar allows his male, or mixed, audience to hear (albeit imagined) women speak candidly about their sexual experiences, and their attitudes towards their marriages. His narrator sneaks into the garden of female private conversation, and his subject moves beyond metaphor to literal discussions of sex.

Dunbar again juxtaposes the content of the women's speeches with his own narrator's description of them. Immediately following the first woman's monologue he describes her as a *semely* [sic], and a few lines later the widow speaks to the other *wlonk* (fine lady). The irony of the narrator's language seems to be acknowledged in the ladies' own reaction to their tale-telling; they laugh heartily:

Than all thai leuch apoun loft with latis full mery  
 And raucht the cop round about full of riche wynis  
 And ralyeit lang, or thai wald rest, with ryatus speche. (*The Tretis*,  
 147-49)

Their mirth is a product of the juxtaposition between their appearance and the rather earthy realities of married life of which they speak. Nonetheless, while they

have negative things to say about marriage, they are not wholly gloomy about the possibilities offered by marriage. Even from their rather cynical viewpoint, the *possibility* of happiness in marriage is acknowledged. The *wedo* rarely refers to the possibility of desperate unhappiness without referring to its counterpart:

How haif ye fairne, be your faith, confese us the treuth,

That band to blise, or to ban, quhilk yow best thinkis;

Or how ye like lif to leid in to lell spousage? (*The Tretis*, 153-55)

The second lady launches into a negative tirade, but not before she also explicitly acknowledges the mismatch between her appearance and the words she is about to say. She says she will spare nothing since “ther is no spy neir” (161). Apart from cleverly discomforting the spying audience, this line makes clear that the lady does not consider her arguments suitable for the public sphere. So, on the one hand the ladies speak more negatively because they believe themselves to be speaking in private, but on the other hand the poet allows them an optimism that he could easily have omitted. The ladies do aspire to be happy in love, and it seems that they believe such happiness to be possible. They do not condemn men outright and do not necessarily believe unhappiness in marriage to be an inevitability.

As we have seen, this invasion into the private sphere allows for an intrusion into the private space of the husband by proxy, indeed into his private physicality and his body. In order for this breach of privacy to be created, however, the ladies too must bare their own privacy, their own physicality. Dunbar seems to envisage the second lady’s sharing of her private space as a physical eruption, a spewing forth of that which properly resides internally:

I sall a ragment reveil fra rute of my hert,  
 A roust that is sa rankild quihill risis my stomok;  
 Now sall the byle all out brist that beild has so lang.  
 For it to beir one my breist wes berdin our hevy;  
 I sall the venome devoid with a vent large  
 And me assuage of the swalme that swellit was gret. (*The Tretis*, 162 -  
 67)

This passage is rich in suggestive imagery and from a critical perspective seems very useful. On the one hand the lady's physical spewing forth suggests the humoral burden of unhappiness – Dunbar's contemporaries might see in her language reference to genuine constitutional imbalances arising from an unhappy marriage situation. This echoes the death of Arcite in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, in that here unhappiness in love is again associated with humoral constitution. On the other hand, Dunbar's language here prefigures twentieth-century ideas about culture being 'written on the body'.<sup>57</sup> This passage acknowledges the physical toll of marriage on women's bodies. Another author might have focused on actual physiological results of mating, for example child-birth, but Dunbar's choice of physical effect emphasizes the link between the woman's emotional response to marriage and her physical condition. We see again some of the peculiar empathy and integrity with which Dunbar approaches their situation. The second wife is unhappy in her marriage, and Dunbar acknowledges here the heavy weight of this burden. This is not scholastic moralizing. Rather Dunbar attempts something close

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57 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993). This, now common, idea was introduced in this book and is used throughout.

to a psychological investigation. It is interesting that the emotional burden of a poor marriage has physical effects, but that the second wife attempts to relieve these effects by *voiding* herself not just of her problems, but of her words. Words again prove to have a powerful effect on the subject's body. Here it offers the promise of relief from emotional distress – a problem shared is a problem halved. It is tempting to find aspects of twentieth-century psychological treatment prefigured in Henryson's account of the women's conversation, a 'talking therapy' of sorts. More likely, however, the woman's voiding of words represents the value of the female discursive space to her, and furthermore emphasizes the distance Henryson perceives between what women admit in public and what he imagines they might actually feel in private.

Viewed from this perspective, *The Tretis* is not so much a conversation overheard as a text intruded upon. If the private conversation of the ladies is seen as a therapeutic effort of sorts, then the disjunction between appearance and reality is a product of the fact that this text should never have been public. Dunbar is exploring the private sphere, that which lies beneath the clothes and the skin. It is interesting that what he finds there is in some respects disappointing and disturbing, but that at the same time he tries to show the logic of the private sphere, that is, the selfish logic of the individual unrestrained by commitment to public image. When considered in this way, his approach to the private sphere actually seems *more* sympathetic than it might otherwise have been. Furthermore his exploration of this 'selfish' logic in fact uncovers many of the challenges that these

women face in marriage, the various threats to their bodies and their health that potentially exist in marriage, and the coping mechanisms upon which they draw.

Unlike the husband of the first lady, the husband of the second is young. Like the first, however, he is “fadit full far and feblit of strenth” (171). He is morally feeble, being a keeper of whores (“a hur maister”) and is a terrible *lychour* (174). Should we have missed the first lady’s complaint about her husband’s penis, the second wife makes the same complaints and uses similarly withering language. Again, lack of virility is seen as a very serious shortcoming:

His lume is waxit larbar and lysis in to swonne.

Wes never sugeorne wer set na one that snaill tyrit,

For eftir sevin oulkis rest it will nought rap anys.

He has bene waistit apone wemen or he me wif chesit,

And in adultre in my tyme I haif him tane oft. (*The Tretis*, 175–79)

Dunbar here takes a prevailing socio-medical point of view (that excessive sexual activity could drain a man’s strength and masculinity) but considers its implications for the man’s wife. Normally such admonitions came in medical treatises, and the concern would be for the man’s well-being. Here, interestingly and unusually, Dunbar realizes that for the *wife* the real issue is that if he spends his time with whores then, for her, he loses his sexual usefulness. Again, this is an unusually utilitarian gaze at the male body. Sexual ‘usefulness’ (in the sense of how it can be used, rather than potency) is a descriptor more readily associated with female bodies in contemporary texts. The sense that the sexual relationship is a business relationship of sorts, an idea introduced by the first lady, is here reinforced, since

the second wife avenges his adultery by conducting adultery of her own. He cannot fulfil his end of the marriage bargain, so she looks elsewhere for recompense. Again Dunbar directs an unusually steady gaze at the reality of these marriages.

The juxtaposition between appearance and reality that critics have identified as one of the core concerns of the poet is also, in fact, a concern for his characters. While aspects of the (male) critical gaze are disappointed in the female character's duplicity, the second wife shares that disappointment, though in her case it is disappointment in her man:

He has a luke without lust and lif without curage,

He has a forme without force and fessoun but vertue

And fair wordis but effect, all fruster of dedis. (*The Tretis*, 188-90)

The two wives' complaints are met by the *wedow's* mock-pious response. She promises a sermon of sorts, intended to give advice to the women. It is a cynical but pragmatic response: her advice is strategic in nature. The irony of her choice of a homiletic tone is that her words will focus on pragmatic action rather than belief or genuine piety. She promises to make them "mekar to men in maneris and coinditiounis", but of course this is only a promise to make them meeker in appearance, not in essence. The disjunction between appearance and reality is here exposed explicitly. The *wedow* declares her own duplicitous practice openly:

I wes dissymblit suttelly in a sanctis liknes;

I semyt sober and sweit and sempill without fraud,

Bot I couth sexty dissaif that suttillar wer haldin. (*The Tretis*, 254-56)

She becomes a teacher of deceit, a sort of anti-Polonius: “Be dragonis baith and dowis ay in double forme” (263). The widow is an accomplished deceiver of men: she has much in common with Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*, although she seems more conscious of her own ability to draw men’s affections despite her lack of affection for them. She has had two husbands, both held her dear but she *dispytit* them both and neither suspected anything. While the other two ladies gave an account of a negotiated space in marriage, the *wedow* speaks as one completely in control of her own destiny. Whether or not this is actually the case is a matter for the audience’s judgement.

Her first husband was old and decrepit, and in fact seems a copy of the husband of the first wife. Like the second wife, she had a young lover whom she met secretly. Her second husband was a wealthy merchant. The widow frames her sexual relationship with her second husband in the same business-like terms as the first two wives, but she is particularly expert. She essentially uses the law of demand to incite his desire to such a point where she can, in return, demand favour:

Bot ay my will wes the war of womanly nature:

The mair he loutit for my luf the les of him I rakit,

And eik (this is a ferly thing) or I him faith gaif

I had sic favour to that freke and feid syne forevir. (*The Tretis*, 321-24)

She explicitly uses the language of financial exchange. She essentially drives her husband to the grave and wrecks his family along the way, but she shows no remorse. Rather, she reinforces her duplicity:

I weip as I wer woful, bot wel is me forevir.

I busk as I wer bailfull, bot blith is my hert;

My mouth it makis murnyng and my mynd lauchis... (*The Tretis*, 415-17)

Her monologue is an outright proclamation of her own duplicity. But again despite the *wedow's* treatment of her husbands, she does not express hatred for all men, nor for masculinity itself. Indeed it is clear that she is attracted to men, and could be seen as being aggressively sexual. Rather, like the other two women her disgust appears to be aimed at ineffectual men. She has no time for men who do not live up to their potential sexual potency. Even in mourning she retains sexual desire:

Ful oft I blenk by my buke and blynis of devotion

To se quhat berne is best brand or bredest in schulderis... (*The Tretis*, 428-29)

Her description of feigned tears using a water-sponge as a ruse (438) is humorous, and demonstrates that she can artificially reproduce the normal physical responses of the body to grief. Whereas earlier in the poem Dunbar used the trope of love-sickness more or less in its traditional form, here he shows that even physical responses to love cannot fully be believed. While in the poetic tradition that influenced him, physical responses to love constitute a sort of evidence that a character is experiencing real love (or lust) that is difficult to control; Dunbar undermines even this assumption and shows that the *wedow* can make a mockery of it. The *wedow* describes this behaviour herself:

I sith without sair hert or seiknes in body,

According to my sable weid I mon haif sad maneris,



Or thai will se all the suth; for certis we wemen

We set us all for the syght, to syle men of treuth. (*The Tretis*, 446-49)

The audience might assume the *wedo* is taking on the role of the low-born hag here, but Dunbar ensures that her deceptive behaviour is associated, in fact, with nobly-born women:

Thocht I want wit in warldlynes I wylis haif in luf,

As ony happy woman has that is of hie blude. (*The Tretis*, 463-64)

Not only is duplicitous behaviour in matters of love associated with women, then, but it is particularly associated with noble women; precisely the women around whom are constructed the façade of the romance tradition. Dunbar's use of the romance mode, then, facilitates a criticism both of the tradition and of the apparent discord between the imagined loves it conjures and reality.

The *wedow* goes on to describe how she shares her attentions among many men, and she does so with an astonishing spatial metaphor that positions her body in the midst of a circle of suitors (490-94). She constructs herself as a lady of great pity, after all "Thar is no liffand leid so law of degre/ That sall me luf unluffit, I am so loik hertit" (497-98). Her apparent generosity parodies the romance tradition in which the lover frames his request for sexual favour as a request for pity on his pained, loving soul. She takes such requests to their hyperbolic conclusion, and her behaviour is framed merely as that of a woman full of pity. Her argument highlights the ridiculousness of the metaphorical association between sexual openness and pity. Indeed, she sarcastically remarks that her "sely sal be saif quhen Sabot all jugis" (502), since she has offered so much pity to her many admirers. Surely this is

intended ironically, as she is well aware of her duplicitousness nature. Amongst friends she can joke even about her salvation, and her remarks highlight the fact that male lovers doom their beloved to judgement in the eyes of the church by asking them to accept sexual advances out of wedlock. Her story is told almost as a saint's life, and indeed she closes her account as follows:

This is the legeand of my lif, thought Latyne it be nane. (*The Tretis*,  
504)

Again there is a similarity here between the *wedo's* attitude towards the male realm of learning and that of Chaucer's Wife of Bath. The poem closes with a summation from the narrator. The narrator appears to take the *wedo's* ironic self-description at face value, describing her as an *eloquent widow*, and it is not clear whether the narrator himself is speaking ironically, or whether he is to be read as a foolish innocent, in the manner of the narrator of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*.

It has been mentioned that this poem might be read as highlighting not just female attitudes towards men, but also male attitudes towards women. Having heard an intimate conversation between women about their dissatisfaction with men, the narrator still closes the poem with a traditional *question d'amour*: "Quhilk wald ye waill to your wif, gif ye suld wed one?" It seems that this narrator has missed the point. Again, perhaps this narrator is being styled as a naive innocent, but it is also possible that if the ladies embody men's fears about women, the male narrator embodies both men's ignorance of the issues affecting women, and women's perceptions of men's ignorance of their needs. For a perceptive audience, or maybe just a female audience, these closing lines from the narrator can in

themselves be a source of laughter, since he has so clearly learned nothing from his encounter 'behind the veil' of female privacy. Like the ladies in the poem, the text forces the male gaze back upon itself, and in doing so highlights the indifference of men to female problems, and exposes the juxtaposition between reality and the imagined loves of the medieval romance tradition. In this poem Dunbar uses the female voice to put men and their bodies under a gaze normally reserved for women. In the *Flyting*, however, one finds a candid exchange between two men, and the audience can trace how they negotiate speaking of each other's bodies in an aggressive, but hetero-normative context.

### *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*

Flyting is a tradition that allows for extremely aggressive verbal intercourse as a demonstration of literary dexterity and colourful imagination. Although a Scots tradition, Germanic precursors exist, most famously in the argument between Beowulf and Unferð in *Beowulf* (506-548).<sup>58</sup> It is also a Norse tradition (generally known as *senna* or *mannjafnaðr*) and the alliterative nature of the language used in flyting lends credence to the suggestion that there might some connection between the Scots tradition and the Germanic examples.<sup>59</sup> It is thought that Dunbar's poem might be the result of a collaboration between him and Walter Kennedy. Walter Kennedy was good enough to be called *Greit Kennedie* by Gavin Douglas in the *Palas*

58 *Beowulf*, ed. R.D. Fulk et al (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

59 Carol J. Glover, "The Germanic Context of the Unferð Episode", *Speculum* 55.3 (1980): 444-468. For a broad discussion of flyting and flyting-like literature see Douglas Gray, "Rough Music: Some Early Invectives and Flytings," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 14 (1984): 21-43. Another early account of possible connections between this poem and the classical tradition is in Harry Morgan Ayres, "'Theodolus' in Scots," *Modern Philology* 15.9 (1918): 539-548.

*of Honoure* (l. 923). This poem is remarkable because it draws on multiple discourses, both learned and vulgar, for maximum impact. While the disagreement itself is not necessarily to be taken seriously, once the interchange has commenced one can assume both that the stereotypes, expressions and language used reflect the currency of genuine insult as it existed in fifteenth-century Scotland, and that the poets make use of genuine subjects of taboo as well as the language of the social periphery for the greatest impact possible. It is not necessary to dismiss this poem, therefore, as artificially constructed in order to illustrate disagreement between a Lowlander and a Highlander. Tasioulas notes that a “large amount of poetic licence is permitted, otherwise some of the claims here would be very serious indeed”, and indeed the poem is prefaced with the claim that what follows is “jocound and mirrie”. Nevertheless each claim indicates what a contemporary audience might have been considered shocking.<sup>60</sup> One can still find valuable evidence for attitudes towards male bodies as they are described in this poem, and one can still witness how each poet dealt with the tricky issue of speaking of another man’s body (even abusively) while remaining within the bounds of acceptable hetero-normative discourse.

The poet’s attacks on each other focus on three main shortcomings, physical deformity, dirtiness and animal-like qualities. They catalogue the ways in which their opposite suffers from these shortcomings using a cornucopia of colourful vocabulary. As in *The Tua Mariit Wemen*, both poets compare their rival to an animal. Kennedy calls Dunbar an “aip, owll irregular,/ Skaldit skaitbird and

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60 Tasioulas 746.

commoun skamelar" (36-37). Dunbar calls Kennedy in turn a "mismaid monstour" (53). Like Kennedy he compares his opponent to a bird, in this case a "revin, raggit ruke" (57). He later compares Kennedy to a cow and an ox (142). The use of beasts of burden is self-explanatory, but the use of birds is also relatively common in flying. David Parkinson sees the bird-description as an insult that, as in the *Owl and Nightingale*, is both serious and farcical at the same time. He also emphasises the playful nature of the Scots examples.<sup>61</sup> Chester Linn Shaver notes that "the owl and the ape have... long been bywords for human deformity" and comments on their use in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*.<sup>62</sup> This shared insult shines demonstrates Dunbar's Chaucerian influences, but also on the common heritage of the two poets. Both Dunbar and Kennedy ascribe either dirtiness or deformity to their opponent on a lavish scale in this text. Kennedy says Dunbar is "dirtin... [and] ramowd (25, 27). He attacks Dunbar's diminutive stature, calling him a "mymmerkin,... dearch,... elf,... yrle" (29, 33, 36, 38). Like the ladies in the *Tua Mariit Wemen*, then, the male speaker can attack his opponent on the grounds that he is diminished in utility (on the assumption that a dwarf is a less useful man than a man of perfect size like a knight). The terms of such utility are rather different to that used by the three ladies in Dunbar's other poem: one does not find Kennedy attacking Dunbar about his sexual utility, and the reader might suppose that this is because to do so might imply that the speaker had some use for him in that regard. Dunbar himself has no such qualms, however: he describes Kennedy as *cuntbittin* (glossed by Tasioulas as

61 David Parkinson, "Mobbing Scenes in Middle Scots Verse: Holland, Douglas, Dunbar," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85.4 (1986): 495.

62 Chester Linn Shaver, "Chaucer's 'Owles and Apes'," *Modern Language Notes* 58.2 (1943): 105. For another shared insult, that of the leek, see Rosalind Field, "'Superfluous Ribaldry': Spurious Lines in the 'Merchant's Tale,'" *The Chaucer Review* 28.4 (1994): 363.

*impotent*). Nevertheless, despite this particularly colourful example he also tends to avoid such descriptions and instead he favours descriptions of ugliness, untrustworthiness, and of course dirtiness. He describes, for example, Kennedy's supposed "frawart phisnomy" and, in the spirit of medieval physiognomy, he says it indicates his malicious nature (81-82). He returns to the association between physical features when he mocks his opponent's pretensions to golden lips, and instead declares that he has "giltin hips" (99). He does describe Kennedy as a *cuckald* (76), however, and this is a useful way of attacking his potency in terms of his utility to his wife in a very specific sense. This term implies his failure is in keeping his wife, rather than focusing on sexual potency in its own right. He returns quickly to more general descriptions of deformity, such as *forworthin* (105) and *carrybald* (184). He does mention Kennedy's genitalia, but in this passage it appears to be more a suggestion of untidy foolishness in an opponent who thinks himself a man of esteem rather than a sexualised insult:

Haill, soverane senyeour, thy bawis hingis throw thy breik. (104)

Dunbar's attack on Kennedy recalls the language of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* and *The Thre Deid Pollis*, as he calls Kennedy a *Lazarus* and describes his *holkit ee* (161, 164). His verbal tirade continues almost as a list of various terms for ugly, old, and decrepit, but again while these are scattered with a few sexualized terms, there are not many. This poem demonstrates, then, in negative terms, the ways in which Dunbar felt it was appropriate for men to speak of other men's bodies. The audience is treated to the language of filth (*beschittin*, 241), to the language of age (*hobland*, 212), and even to the language of idolatry (*Mahoun*, 233).

Dunbar's general avoidance of sexual terminology, apart from the few occasions mentioned, demonstrates both that here he speaks very much with the male voice, but it also demonstrates his particular imaginative flexibility in allowing his female characters to speak of sexual potency in *The Tua Mariit Wemen*.

A great irony of this poem, and one might suppose the crux of the joke, is that despite the fact that each poet unleashes a tirade of invectives, they also each accuse the other of being dirty-mouthed, while seemingly oblivious to the vulgarity of their own insults. While calling each other names, they argue that the other should be punished for the language that they are using:

Se sone thow mak my commissar amendis

And lat him lay sax leichis on thy lendis,

Maikly in recompansing of thi scorne... (44-46)

It must be obvious to the audience that in condemning Dunbar to this punishment, Kennedy is of course condemning himself to the same. In a sense the two poets highlight their own naughtiness of language as well as that of their opponent and the language of shame being called upon is surely ironic. Dunbar answers the above accusation, for example, with the claim that Kennedy is "full of rebaldrie" (57). In returning each other's attacks they are, of course, spurring on their opponent to increase the violence of their language, and yet they then pretend shock when their opponent does so. In calling Kennedy "ane baird blasphemar" (62) Dunbar is scorning Kennedy, yet at the same time praising him for his adeptness at this language game. What one finds in the *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie*, then, is a literary game that allows the two poets to catalogue all of their best insults, and to

list all of the words and insults that a medieval audience might find shocking. This is humorous, but also very useful for this study. Here we have a catalogue of shortcomings and an excellent source of vulgar body vocabulary.

It is also interesting that both poets propose to punish their opponent with physical violence. We have already seen Kennedy's threat to Dunbar, above, and Dunbar returns the threat in kind:

Throw all Bretane it sal be blawin owt  
 How that thow, poysinit pelour, gat thy paikis.  
 With ane doig leich I schepe to gar the schowt,  
 And nowther to the tak knyf, swerd nor aix. (*Flyting*, 69-72)

This speaks volumes of the physical violence inherent in medieval life, but of course in this case one would assume that these are empty threats. It does indicate, metaphorically, the power of language from the poets perspective. Each is a man of words, and so, while they might not actually take a whip to one another, they use the best tools available to them in their colourful language. Henryson's Cresseid was greatly concerned for her reputation and demonstrated a keen awareness of the power of language over one's reputation. It is clear that language had the potential to affect one's physical well-being in having an effect on one's reputation. One could suggest, therefore, that the sheer scale of the threats that Dunbar and Kennedy make are a sort of defence as well as an ironic tribute. In allowing the argument to grow to become hyperbolic, they ensure that the audience do not take them entirely seriously. Considering the importance of reputation and the damaging consequences of slander, this is an important feature of their exchange. Glover notes



that in the Norse context, flyting is “not just the prelude to violence but itself the oral equivalent of war”.<sup>63</sup> That is certainly the case of this contest, although arguably there is less real malice underpinning this contest. Ward Parks agrees that this case might be considered “ludic” whereas the heroic flyting may indicate genuine contest.<sup>64</sup>

What is most striking about Dunbar’s flyting is that the fictional contest between the two poets creates a space in which he can speak of male bodies. Just as love poetry allows poets to speak of that which is to be aspired to in female bodies, so in the *Flyting* Dunbar can speak of that which is to avoided in male bodies. Whereas the audience’s gaze is normally directed towards female bodies, Dunbar and Kennedy direct the audience gaze at the male body of their opponent. In *The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* Dunbar enables this unusual gaze by allowing the audience to share in the female perspective of his characters. In the *Flyting* male bodies are examined, but it is a safe space, free of any suggestion of desire. The poem allows for a discussion of male bodies from the male perspective. If the *Flyting* is ludic, its playfulness serves to protect the speakers from misinterpretation while allowing them to examine the male body.

This chapter has demonstrated Dunbar’s unique approach to the language of the body. Like Henryson he draws on Chaucer for inspiration, and there is also a moral undertone to much of his writing. Like Chaucer, however, he treats the body in a wide variety of ways. While he draws on professional discourse to a much more limited extent than Chaucer, he manipulates the language of the courtly love

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63 Glover 452.

64 Ward Parks, “Flyting, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres”, *Poetics Today* 7.3 (1986): 439-458.

tradition to refocus the poetic gaze on men's bodies. He demonstrates a keen interest in how women might really feel about men, but unlike Chaucer he creates a scenario in which the audience supposedly has access to women's private conversations. His *Flyting* is a remarkable demonstration of poetic virtuosity, but it also catalogues the many anxieties that men may have about their bodies in the Middle Ages. His narratorial gaze can be fiercely direct, and in the ludic insults of the *Flyting* one sees a demonstration of his capacity to uncover all that might be wrong with the medieval body.

## Conclusion

This thesis shows that the language of the body was an important tool for the three poets examined. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, through its distinctive narrative frame, allows for multiple voices to be heard. This gives Chaucer the opportunity to speak of the body in different ways. In doing so he borrows from multiple modes of discourse, whether medical, philosophical, religious, or the language of courtly love poetry. His work demonstrates fundamental medieval anxieties about the body's stability. His language of the body does not, in itself, resist such instability, rather it simply reflects the ways that people's speech betrayed their fears for their bodies. It also demonstrates how authoritative modes of discourse were used by different social types, and how their own claims to authoritative discourse were frequently unreliable. The Summoner and the Pardoner exemplify the juxtaposition of idealised authoritative discourse and actual bodily nature and behaviour. Alys of Bath is the character who best voices such mistrust of authoritative discourse and who seems to best understand the ways in which the language of scholarly learning can impose social order. Her fight with her husband is symbolic of attempts to resist such order and the modes of discourse associated with it. She presents an alternative vision, in which a female subject resists the power of authority upon her body. Chaucer's work does not allow for any easy conclusion about his own attitudes. This analysis of the language of the body in his poetry underlines, however, his unique genius, and reaffirms the status of his uniquely versatile linguistic talents.

Henryson's poetry, while not showing the same variety in approach as that of Chaucer, shows his moral consistency and highlights his own visually

descriptive verbal palette. One could argue that, in writing a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, he chooses a single path and a single voice among the many available to him in his predecessor's work. His poetry does not simply mimic Chaucer's, however, and *The Testament of Cresseid*, in its moral judgement on Cresseid and its graphic description of her physical disintegration, marks a new departure in the Troilus story. His poetry reflects a distinctive style and a single-minded approach to the body in society. If Chaucer's work highlights the role of authoritative modes of discourse, then Henryson is an example of a poet who totally embodies a particular authoritative point of view.

Dunbar, like Chaucer, has the capacity to demonstrate moral judgement, while at the same time he demonstrates a singular curiosity about alternative points of view, and relishes the bawdy language of insult. *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* seems deeply influenced by Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. And yet, whereas Alys is defiant in her declaration of her intellectual independence, Dunbar's poem instead offers the imagined private thoughts of women. In that private space Dunbar finds (or creates) well-constructed and believable criticism of male behaviour and male bodies. In doing so he explores the sexual value of male bodies in a way that is not to be found elsewhere in medieval poetry. His *Flyting* extends this new perspective on male bodies to men's attitudes to men. It illustrates his verbal dexterity and at the same time shows the many ways in which men were worried by their own bodies.

In many respects this thesis' conclusions will only serve to reinforce the view that Chaucer is the most talented of medieval poets. Indeed, his use of the language of the body is innovative and highlights the social construction of the

body in new and interesting ways. At the same time, his Scottish followers demonstrate their own ways of approaching the body. Henryson's choice is to construct a singular narrative voice, while Dunbar shares Chaucer's flair for the creation of shifting perspectives, but in doing so he examines the male body in a way that had not previously been attempted. As well as highlighting the wide variety of choices available to a medieval poet in speaking of the body, it is hoped that this thesis will encourage a re-evaluation of the Scottish poets, and Dunbar in particular. His work matches that of Chaucer in energy and verbal dexterity. All three poets show that the body was a central keystone in the medieval construction of individual identity, and that then, as today, authoritative modes of discourse were established in order to control them.

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